

The Onyx Stars

by The Hidden Sith

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Summary: A lost ship, a lost warrior, and a lost mind find themselves stranded in an unknown world. Full of vast wonders, threats, and opportunities, this new world is an unknown element for a crew accustomed to war and hardship. But, all Edens fall and beyond the embers of war lay the dawn of victory. Halo/Mass Effect AU
John/Cortana, Lasky/Palmer

1. Chapter 1: Dusk

****The Onyx Stars****

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

****AN:** **Tons of thanks to WarpObscura and Spartan303 (Jon Harper on FF) for beta-ing and helping the plot be smoothed out. Don't worry, I'm not abandoning Siege of Reach. I still plan to finish it and it's sequel _Messiah Guide Me Home_.

Enjoy! :)

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****Chapter One: Dusk****

UNSC _Infinity_

Installation 03

"Captain Lasky, we are dropping out of slipspace!" Helm Officer DevÃ©ro called out. "ETA, two minutes."

Captain Thomas Lasky braced himself against the holotable that dominated the bridge of humanity's most powerful warship. The table projected a blocky blue model of _Infinity_, flanked by ten _Charon_-class Light Frigates as they raced through slipspace to intercept the Didact and rendezvous with the Master Chief.

"Understood Lieutenant." Lasky said in response. He looked over to the right, a middle-aged man with graying brown hair and dull green eyes sat, "Lieutenant Austen. Prepare bow energy projectors, ready all forward MACs and prep Howler missile pods."

Lieutenant Eric Austen nodded, "Aye sir!" He said back energetically, hands racing across his station-the two bow energy projectors were _Infinity_'s main armament, able to slice apart a Covenant Assault Carrier in a single salvo. Each of her four MACs could dish out over forty megatons of directed kinetic energy and a handful of Howler missiles could vaporize entire Covenant vessels. The _Infinity_ was heavily armed, and crewed, with Humanity's best and brightest.

Infinity's model on the holotable was now highlighted an eerie green as shields were raised and main weapons were activated.

"Roland." Lasky continued, the small yellow of _Infinity_'s resident Artificial Intelligence snapped into existence on the opposite end of the holotable.

"Yes sir?" The small AI asked, hands clasped at the small of his back and feet shoulder width apart.

"Prep Onagers, ready the Pulse Lasers, and bring our Fortress network online." Thomas ordered. The Covenant and Didact were almost guaranteed to be deploying strike craft, with out _Infinity_'s CIWS suite active, they would be overwhelmed and possibly boarded.

Roland saluted, "Aye sir."

The Infinity's sides were filled with black dots as the CIWS suite activated.

"When we drop out," Lasky commented, "I want Broadsword Squadrons Alpha through Hotel deployed to engage the forward advances of the enemy force. Load them with Fury and HAVOK warhead. Squadrons India through Oscar are to deploy to reinforce _Ivanoff's_ defenses. If I remember correctly, it only has a dozen Mark 2 Onagers and those will most likely be overwhelmed."

"Understood sir." Roland said. He paused for a few seconds, "Squadron leaders report green. They are readying their craft now."

"Thank you Roland." Lasky said.

"Of course sir, just doing my job." The AI commented before disappearing.

"We are dropping out of slipspace..." Helm Officer DevÃ©ro said, "Now!"

Infinity looked up and out of the _Infinity_'s expansive bridge windows. The aurora-like colors of Slipspace vanished in favor of the red and black hues of space around the Halo ring. In the distance hovered seven CCS-class battlecruisers escorting the monstrosity of the Didact's flagship. They were just outside of _Infinity_'s effective combat range of 120,000 kilometers at a little over 200,000.

"Designated squadrons, launch." Commander, Air Group Lieutenant Commander Peter Sebastian called out from his station to the left of the bridge.

Lasky looked at the holotable's display, six hundred F-41 _Broadwords_ had spilled out of _Infinity_'s launch tubes. Half were racing towards the Seraph Fighters, Phantom Drop Ships and Lich Gunships and the other half were racing towards _Ivanoff_ station, blowing Seraphs out of the sky with high powered missiles and pulse laser strikes.

The ten _Charon_-class Frigates flanked _Infinity_ on the top and the bottom. Their shields were raised and weapons ready, the few fighters the 500 meter vessels carried had launched raced towards _Ivanoff_.

Lasky walked away from the holotable and shook his head at the warped portion of the floor in front of the bridge windows. It was where _Infinity_'s original commander, Andrew Del Rio, had been vaporized by a Promethean pulse grenade when the robotic abominations had stormed the vessel.

"Priselkov, open communications to every vessel in range. Helm! Bring us into firing range!" Lasky shouted as he took up position at the fore of the bridge.

"Aye sir!" Priselkov replied, "Communications open!"

"This is Captain Thomas Lasky of the UNSC _Infinity_. For too long, your kind terrorized ours. But now, we are the giants, and you the powerless. We will do what you did to us. Prepare."

"We are in range." DevÃ©ro said.

"Austen, open fire!" Lasky said, "Burn them from the skies!"

"Aye sir!" Austen responded, "Bow energy projectors firing! Bow energy projectors away!"

The _Infinity_ advanced forward and from her bow, two brilliant

silvery white beams lanced across space, slamming against the Covenant battlecruisers amid-ship. Shields held for all but a second before they popped like a soap-bubble and the sleek, predatory craft crumpled like tissue paper. Two CCS cruisers instantly vanished in puffs of blue and purple fire.

"Fire MAC one." Lasky said.

"Firing MAC One, aye." Austen said, "MAC away."

One of _Infinity_'s MAC fired, a 6 ton slug transversing space quicker than an eye-or Covenant sensor, could see. The slug impacted with the force of a fifty-megaton bomb but due to the kinetic properties all of the energy was imparted on a certain region. The shields of a CCS cruiser vanished and the vessel exploded into glittery fragments.

Roland popped up on the holotable. "Remaining CCS cruisers are moving towards us." he informed Lasky, "Plasma torpedo impacts along shield sectors alpha 1, beta 2 and charlie 10. No damage."

Lasky crossed his arms and smiled faintly, a plasma torpedo back in the day could easily gut even the largest of UNSC vessels. Not now though, with Forerunner enhanced shields, human ships could survive an entire battlegroup firing on them.

>"MAC two, fire!"<p>

"MAC two, firing. MAC away." Austen said.

Another CCS cruiser exploded into debris no larger than the size of a baseball.

"MAC three." Lasky started, "fire."

"MAC three, firing. MAC away."

There were now only two battlecruisers remaining as the fifth died, speared amid ship and now in two parts, expelling flame and debris as it listed uselessly in the void. The Covenant Cruisers turned and engaged their main engines, quickly trying to escape the battle and recover when a 50 megaton nuclear bomb detonated in their midst. Shields overloaded and hulls boiled before the vessel's spines snapped.

"_This is Squadron Echo, Charlie Charlie Sierras down._" The speakers on the _Infinity_ crackled.

"Captain Lasky, the Didact's vessel is bringing it's main weapons to bear on us." Roland reported, his voice tinted with fear and trepidation.

"All frigate, break! Fire at will!" Lasky ordered, quickly walking away from the bridge windows as heavy titanium-carbon armor plates slid down. He felt hydraulics mechanisms slowly depress the bridge deeper into _Infinity_'s armor belt. Holographic displays snapped into existence, showing everything from the perspectives of the thousands of cameras on _Infinity_'s hull.

"He's firing!" Roland cried.

The _Infinity_ was rocked by an impact as the Didact's plasma lance splashed against the shield. Sparks erupted from conduits on the bridge.

Roland fell to his knees, "Shields are at fifty percent and falling! Another hit and we are gone!" He shouted.

"Helm! Evasive maneuvers!" Lasky said, stumbling towards the holotable and bracing himself against it.

The _Infinity_ banked away, her three main engines propelling her away at a breakneck pace.

"Roland, fire all starboard weapons, pulse lasers, archers, I don't care!" Lasky ordered.

"Aye..." Roland said.

Pulse lasers, 70mm railgun rounds, and 15cm MAC slugs lanced out in the thousands. The ordinance impacted harmlessly against the Didact's shield.

"He's charging up for another shot!" Roland shouted, "If this was a Forerunner battleship and not a picket ship we'd be dead already!"

Ivanoff Station

Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy John-117 sidestepped a barrage of plasma fire, throwing his two ton form into a wall. He ducked and rolled, bringing his MA5D up and peppering the lead Sangheili minor with 8mm sabot armor-piercing rounds. The solid tungsten rounds shredded the torso of the massive alien, blood and organs slapping against the wall behind the creature before it finally collapsed dead.

John pushed off the wall, pile-driving another elite, tackling the much larger warrior. John retracted his arm, made a fist, and punched through the Sangheili's skull. It crumbled as soon as his fist made contact with the bone and before the Sangheili even knew what happened, the brain had been destroyed.

The Master Chief retracted his fist-it was coated with blood and brain matter. He rolled as another Elite charged him, grabbing the serrated obsidian blade on his hip and driving it through the alien's shield. The reptile roared in pain as the blade pierced its armor and into its back. John twisted the knife and pulled it out, finishing off the elite with a precise punch to the back of the head.

"John!" Cortana said in his radio.

"What?" He asked, MA5D clattering at devastating the lance of Grunts and shield-bearing Jackals.

"The Didact, he's pulling off!" She said excitedly, "The _Infinity_ and her frigates just arrived in system."

_Lasky is braver than I believed. _John thought, "What about the cruisers? What are their status?" A single energy projector hit from those Covenant cruisers could vaporize the station and the asteroid

it was built on.

:Just a second." Cortana replied, her voice momentarily becoming much more digitized. It was her Rampancy, it was slowly killing her. "I'm detecting the debris from several and the radiation from a 50 megaton nuke."

"_Infinity_ isn't holding back." John commented.

"No, they're not." Cortana said, "John."

"Yes?" he responded, sidestepping a plasma grenade and caving in a Grunt's chest with an open-palm hit.

"If we can get to _Infinity_ and if we have enough time, I can recompile my neural net." Cortana said, desperation in her voice.

"I'll get you there." John said firmly, he dove through an airlock as the entire compartment he had just been in vented, a ASGM-10 missile from a _Broadsword_ detonating against the station.

"You promise?" She asked, voice again digitizing with the fringes of John's HUD becoming static for a moment.

"Yes." John affirmed, "I will get you back to _Infinity_. And we'll be okay."

"Thank..." Cortana struggled.

"Cortana, please relax." John pleaded. "I need you to relax and focus on finding me the HAVOK so we can destroy the Composer."

"Okay." Cortana said defeatedly, "HAVOK, 30 megaton, level 1."

"Thank you Cortana." John said.

"You..." She started, her voice changed and his helmet began to have lines of static racing down it. "_This place will be your home. This place will be your tomb_."

"Cortana!" He shouted.

"I'm sorry!" She cried, "We need to hurry!"

John's heart sunk, Cortana as barely holding on. The ramblings, the slowness, everything signaling rampancy had come to an apotheosis onboard Ivanoff station.

"Okay, just hold on Cortana." He said, voice uneven.

John turned and ran towards the elevator, quickly punching in 'LEVEL 1' and feeling as the cube of steel dropped, descending deep into the asteroid. John checked his weapons, an MA5D firing 8mm sabot AP tungsten rounds and a M395 Designated Marksmen Rifle chambered with .338 Lapua sabot DU-AP rounds.

The elevator came to a screeching halt and the door slowly opened. John grabbed his DMR and snapped it up, photo-reactive panels on his

armor changing to blend him in with the environment. It was dark in the ordinance bay, however his night-vision suite rectified that quite easily.

Instantly, four squat figures appeared in his night vision. They were outlined in red and John recognized their movement. They were Grunts. He quickly dispatched them, four pulls of the trigger and four upper torsos of the aliens vanished as the hypersonic round punched through their skulls and detonated their methane breathing tanks.

John looked to his motion detector, it was clear with only the faint grey outline of the 30 megaton HAVOK warhead directly in the middle of the room. He took a tentative step forward, scanning the room, looking for the slightest shimmer of air to identify a cloaked stealth elite. He scanned with thermal vision and infra-red.

Nothing.

He sprinted towards the HAVOK and pulled it's warhead from the main body of the missile. He examined it closely, activating the stand-by mode. He turned away and placed it on the small of his back, the magnetic seals latching onto the football sized nuke.

John activated his radio, establishing a link with the _Infinity_. "Infinity, this is Sierra-117. I need support to evacuate the crew of _Ivanoff _station."

"_Chief, this is Lasky. I can't bring Infinity in or the Didact will destroy us-it's cat and mouse out here. Our weapons won't dent his shields."_"

"Sir, I have a warhead with HAVOK grade ordinance. If you can punch a hole through his shields I can destroy his ship from the inside." John explained, "But first, I need Ivanoff station evacuated."

"_Roger that chief, Frigate Obsidian 1 is en route."_ Lasky responded, "_Eta, thirty seconds. They are slipping in."_"

"Thank you sir." John said.

"_No thanks necessary chief. Just take this bastard out!"_ An explosion drowned out Lasky's voice before fading "_Reorient us, main battery, prepare to fire "_

"Sir, where is Battlegroup Dakota, a full Battlegroup should be able to breach the Didact's shields." John asked.

"_I sent them to Earth. Incase we failed, the Home Fleet would be able to be bolstered by Dakota and stand a chance."_"

"Understood."

"_Lasky out."_"

"Cortana?" John whispered, "Are you there?"

"Yeah I am Chief." She said, voice firm. "I'm ready."

UNSC Infinity

"Obsidian 1 is away." Roland reported, "Obsidian 1 has arrived at the station. Commander will bug out when evacuation is complete."

Lasky nodded, "Thank you Roland." A massive boom drowned out all other noise on the bridge, "Report!"

"Energy torpedo just blew out the shield generators in sector twenty. We have decompression." Roland responded hastily, "Emergency shielding activated. Huragok and techs are diverting forces there."

Lasky shook his head, _Infinity_ was taking a beating, "Helm! Expose our port side, full broadside of Archer and Rapier pods! That should give him a bloody nose."

"Or a slightly uncomfortable pinch." Roland retorted.

"Shut it."

"Aye sir."

The _Infinity_ brought its port side to face the Didact-thousands of missiles erupted from their casing and raced forward towards the Didact's mothership. Pulse lasers lanced out, vaporizing the missiles with little effort. A few made it through but detonated harmlessly against the powerful energy shields.

"Reading a slight drop of the Didact's shield strength. It's at 79 percent." Roland said dishearteningly. "Every weapon on this ship, enough power to destroy a continent and that damn thing won't break."

Lasky braced himself against the holotable, "Divert all _Broadwords_ from interception duty, have them barrage the Didact with their missiles. Obsidian two, three, four and five are to converge on the shields at the top of his vessel. Obsidian six, seven, eight, nine and ten, focus MAC fire on his bottom shields."

"Aye."

The _Infinity_'s escorts zoomed around the Didact's vessel, missiles, rail gun slugs and pulse lasers splashing harmlessly against the Forerunner shields. Her frigates took up firing positions from five thousand kilometers away while _Infinity_ dueled the Didact at fifty thousand. 3 ton slugs lanced out of the frigates and slammed into the shields of the Didact with the force of a megaton bomb each. Yet the Forerunner vessel remained unflinching as it continued its attack on the Human dreadnought.

"Damn it!" Austen shouted, "Obsidian 2 just got hit by the Didact's energy lance. She's venting atmosphere, the captain and crew are escaping in life pods and the AI has set a course to crash into the Didact's ship at full speed."

"That's a multi million ton vessel." Lasky commented, "At max speed she'll have some behind her." Lasky ran the calcs through his head, a gigaton of kinetic energy would be exerted by the collision-maybe

enough to let a small gap for the Chief to get in.

"Sir, a _Broadsword_ fighter has left the launch bay of _Ivanoff_ station. It's at full burn towards the Didact's space mini-van." Roland commented. It was true, the Didact's ship wasn't even a full Forerunner war vessel-it was a private cruiser.

Lasky smiled, "It's the Chief!" He said, he looked over to Tactical "Austen, sync up out bow energy projectors and bow MACs for a full barrage!"

"Aye sir!"

"Helm, bring us about, get me a clear targeting line on the vessel's center of mass!" Lasky added. "We'll hit this guy with everything we got! Load bow Archers with Fury tac-nukes."

"Aye sir." Helm Officer DevÃ©ro responded. "Engaging engines, full burn."

The _Infinity_ swung it's bow towards the Didact, shields flaring as plasma bolts impacted the powerful human shields.

"Our shields are at fifteen percent. Energy is bleeding through and we are receiving damage to the dorsal hull." Roland commented. If it was the old Titanium-A they would be dead now. The new Aegis composite armor that the _Infinity_ and the rest of the fleet were outfitted with was a composite material of Titanium-A3, Carbon, Steel, and laced with meta-materials-it could survive a beating.

"Prepare to fire." Lasky ordered calmly, "Time until Obsidian 2 impacts the Didact's shields?"

"Fifteen seconds." Roland replied.

Lasky nodded, "Fire!"

"Aye! Firing full bow weapons." Austen said. "Bow weapons away!"

The _Infinity_'s bow was consumed by a massive flash as four MAC rounds went tearing out of their barrels and raced towards the Didact's vessel. Two high-powered energy projector beams lanced behind them. They struck as one with Obsidian 2-enough power to render a continent uninhabitable, finally allowed a small hole to be created in the Didact's shields.

Broadsword 9

"The _Infinity_ did it! The Didact has a breach in his shields!" Cortana said, shocked. "Now Chief, now!"

John engaged the _Broadswords_ afterburners and felt the small strike craft rocket into the hole in the Didact's shields. He quickly entered the firing number for the HAVOK missile mounted under the nose of the fighter. The screen flashed red, the launch computer was fried.

He was beneath the Didact's shield, the nuclear detonation would be

compressed and contained, amplifying the 30 megaton detonation and completely vaporizing the Forerunner craft. However, if he couldn't launch the missile, then the Didact's vessel would be safe.

"I am another lost child, another lost mind." Cortana croaked in his ear. Her rampancy was becoming worse and worse, "Dam nit!" She cried, "John, I'm sorry!"

"Don't worry." John reassured her, "It's okay."

"No, its not John!" Cortana said, "I'm putting you in danger."

"No, you're not." John said in response, he tensed, "I'm going to be okay. And so are you."

"Ok.'" She struggled, voice fluctuating.

"I need you to launch the missile so we can end this and get you back to _Infinity_." John said, "And then, we are going to get you fixed."

Cortana steeled herself and John could hear her hissing in pain, "Launching missile. Once it's deployed we have a five minute window to get out of here."

"Cortana." John said. "Hold on, just a little longer."

There was no response for a second and John felt Cortana struggling to speak.

"Hurry." Was all she said.

The ASGM-10 missile mounting the HAVOK nuke shot out from the _Broadsword's_ nose, racing toward's the Didact's center of mass. John banked his fighter away, engaging the engines at full power. He crossed the distance between the Didact's shield and hull quickly and burst out of the shield as the nuke detonated.

"_This is AI Roland to all UNSC forces in area, prepare for immediate departure. Obsidian squadrons, all Broadwords return to Infinity." _John's radio blared.

_Another AI? _John thought, C_ould this be something to help Cortana_, "This is Sierra-117 to Roland, respond."

"_This is Roland, how may I help you sir?"_ The AI politely asked.

"I need you to establish a link with Cortana and start confining the rampant splinters." John said, "It'll hold her through until a more permanent solution can be devised."

"_Understood sir, linking now._" The other AI said. "_Uplink established, beginning confinement._"

"John." Cortana whispered, "Thank you."

UNSC Infinity

"Obsidian is returning now. We have ninety fire percent of

Broadswords docked, waiting on Echo Squadron and the Master Chief." The CAG reported to Lasky, "ETA two minutes until we can jump to slipspace."

"Thank you Commander." Lasky responded, he looked over to Austen, "Keep pressure on the Didact, that nuke is going to be going off in a few seconds-he can still shoot it down with a pulse laser."

"Aye sir." Austen replied.

Roland flashed into existence on the holotable, "Sir, Echo just landed. We are just waiting for Master Chief now."

"Open a com channel, Roland." Lasky said. Roland nodded as the channel was opened, "Chief, we are prepared to jump. What's your status?"

It was a few seconds before John responded. _"Sir, engines are failing. I am coming in for a crash landing, clear launch bay nine."_

"Do it!" Lasky turned to Roland. "Evac that hangar and seal it off."

"Aye sir."

Broadsword 9

John swore as the _Broadsword_ he was piloting smacked into the hangar deck of the _Infinity_. It bucked, bouncing off the solid steel deck and spinning as it touched the ground again. Warthogs, supply crates and other items were crushed as the multi-ton strike fighter devastated the hangar bay. It's engine gave one last puff and slammed the fighter into the wall.

The engines vomited out sparks and John could smell smoke in the cockpit. Looking around, he unlatched the flight harness and climbed out of the cockpit. He was disoriented, dizzy even and fell to the ground with a loud crash. Looking up before he succumbed to unconsciousness, the Didact's vessel became a brilliant star as the warhead detonated. The blast was amplified by the shields and when they failed, only scattered debris was left.

John's head felt too heavy for his body and he let it fall. The black abyss of unconsciousness seemed to welcome him, and despite his resistance, overcame him.

_John and Cortana sat on the edge of a cliff on Requiem, the artificial light reflecting off of the moon high above in the artificial sky. His helmet was off and Cortana's holochip rested gently on top. She sat cross legged and he with his armored legs stretched out, palms flat against the ground and enjoying the sterile air of Requiem. _

"_John._" _Cortana said_.

_He looked over to his companion. _

_Cortana drew her legs close to herself, letting her head rest on her now upright knees. "I want you to know that no matter what happens to

me, I'll always watch over you."_

_John's expression became stern, "_I won't let anything happen to you."_

Cortana dropped her arms from hugging her legs, "You can't stop it John."

"_Yes." John replied. "Yes, I can. I won't lose you."_

Cortana reached out and gently touched his helmet. "But you will John. I'll be gone, they'll assign you a new AI. It won't be me."

John made a fist and slammed it into the ground, "I won't lose you. Not again!" He responded. "I kept my promise to come back for you on High Charity-and I'll keep my promise now."

"_To get me back to Earth." Cortana stated, "Back to Halsey."

>

John nodded, "Yes."

"_John, my problem could cause me to hurt you." Cortana said sadly. "I don't want that to happen-I don't want to hurt you."_

_John leaned down, "You won't." He reassured her. _

Cortana looked up at the night sky. "I want to know John."

"_Yes?" He responded, looking at her eyes. They reminded him of Reach's twin moons. _

"_If they give you a new AI." She asked, "Would you take it?"_

John was taken back by the question. "Would I take another AI if offered? No." He responded firmly, "You and I are a team. And we will always be one."

_She smiled, "I thought so." She knew what he meant. _

_John smiled back, the first time he had smiled in a long time.

_

"_Sir." Another voice said_.

_He looked around. _

"_Sir!"_

UNSC Infinity

"Sir." Roland said, "I am detecting an energy build up in system, I suggest we leave immediately." Roland reported calmly, seemingly preoccupied with something.

Lasky was still staring at the sparkling debris of the Didact's vessel. _A nuke shouldn't have been enough to destroy a Forerunner vessel-even a space mini-van._ He thought.

"Sir." Roland said again.

"Yes, jump us to Slipspace. We're done here." Lasky responded, looking over his shoulder. "The station took too much damage, it'll need repairs."

"Aye sir." Roland acknowledged, "Helm, course is plotted. Jump us."

"Aye." DevÃ©ro said. "Entering Slipspace. Destination, Sol."

The _Infinity_ banked away from the asteroid belt, a shimmering blue and black portal appearing off her bow and swallowing the six-kilometer vessel whole.

Lasky stared out at the window, watching as the strands of slipspace energy whipped past the _Infinity_. He still personally couldn't believe the _Infinity_ was under his command, the most powerful vessel in the UNSC fleet under the command of someone a few decades ago was ready to leave it all.

Then Corbulo happened.

Elites and other Covenant rained from the sky, slaughtering everybody. His friends, teachers, peers. Everybody died.

Silva.

He closed his hand around the shard of Hunter armor that hung loosely from his dog-tags. The Master Chief, John, had saved his life that day-he had a life debt to the man. And so did Humanity.

"Sir, the Master Chief has been moved to Infirmary Alpha. He has several fractured ribs, several organs with contusions, a broken pelvic bone and a broken arm. Possible concussion too." Roland reported.

Lasky's eyes shot wide open, and he pivoted towards Roland. "I want the best Doctors on the ship attending to him, I don't care if you even have to get the Huragok to help."

"Sir." Roland saluted.

Lasky was about to turn away when something came up in the back of his mind, "What about Cortana?" He asked.

"Sir?" Roland asked.

"Cortana." Lasky said firmly, "The Chief's AI."

Roland, if he had lungs, would have inhaled heavily. "I have established an uplink with her and we're trying to sift through the rampant splinters and destroy them. It's a lengthy procedure but I have hope it will at least give her time to plan on reconstructing her neural net."

"Can the Huragok help?" Lasky asked, Cortana was as much a hero as John was.

"Aye, they can sir. It is possible, these being genuine Forerunner creatures, that they have advanced AI techniques to delay Rampancy." Roland pondered, crossing his arms and shifting weight to his right hip.

"Do it. Cortana is," He tried to find an adequate word, "she's beyond important to Chief. He walked through hell and back to get her and he'll die for her."

"I understand sir." Roland said, "I'll do my best."

He was about to deactivate his avatar projection when Lasky said his name again, "Roland. Keep Glassman away from Cortana."

"Aye sir." Roland agreed. Glassman was a notorious enemy of Doctor Catherine Halsey, the person who Cortana called 'mother' and who she was based on.

Alarms blared across the bridge. "Sir!" DevÃ©ro shouted, "Slipspace field is fluctuating!"

Roland's expression began tense and he looked up, "Damn it. Sir, we need to drop out now or the Infinity will be torn apart."

"Do it!"

The Infinity shuddered as it tore its way out of FTL. Lasky instantly knew something was wrong, Slipspace didn't cause any force to be exerted on the vessel when it left the sub-dimension.

As the aurora of Slipspace vanished, Lasky was greeted by a purple, blue, and white nebula and a multi-pronged space station looming thousands of kilometers away.

"Raise shields!" He barked.

This wasn't Earth.

2. Chapter 2: Monument

****The Onyx Stars****

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

****AN: ****Tons of thanks to WarpObscura and Spartan303 (Jon Harper on FF), again, for beta-ing and helping the plot be smoothed out. Also, wow! Reaction to this was stellar!

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

****To address a few things:**** Yes, somethings have been changed, namely UNSC technology. There is no reason why they are utilizing bullets that were used in Vietnam and tanks that would get killed by a Tiger Tank. Fans of Crysis may recognize the calibers of weapons used, and yes, I am using Crysis-like calibers and rounds propelled by ETC technology.

Here's Chapter 2: Monument

Enjoy:)

3 Sith

****Chapter Two: Monument****

****UNSC _Infinity_****

****Bridge****

****0 hours post arrival ****

"Unidentified space station 300,000 kilometers off our bow." Roland said. "Unknown design and configuration."

"Size? Armaments?" Lasky asked, "Escorts?"

Roland paused for a second, "The space station is approximately 40 kilometers long and is composed of several prongs affixed to a central ring. Hull composition is unknown but similar to that of known Forerunner alloy."

"That thing is massive." Lasky commented. "Are there any vessels around it?"

Roland nodded, "Aye, there is. Two hundred vessels ranging from ten meter personal craft, freighters roughly 500 meters long to a two kilometer cruiser-analogue. The cruiser has been marked as Alpha-1 and seems to be leading a contingent of other military vessels towards us. They will be in weapons range." Roland paused, "In two minutes."

"Armaments?" Lasky inquired, "Are their weapons online?"

"Weapons consist of mass accelerator cannons and pulse laser arrays. Limited torpedo tubes across the fleet." Roland responded, "Their weapons are active and have targeted us."

"Austen, load bow MAC guns and open missile ports. Don't target the unknowns." Lasky said.

"Aye sir." Lieutenant Austen replied, "Weapons ready."

"Helm, swing our bow around to face the oncoming vessels." Lasky told DevÃ©ro.

"Aye sir." DevÃ©ro responded.

Lasky saw the view out of the bridge window change from the unknown space station to a formation of fifty ships of differing sizes racing towards the _Infinity_. _

"Sir." Priselkov said, "I am receiving a communications package from the unknown vessels. It appears to contain several language programs and first contact handshakes."

Lasky looked over to the woman operating communications."Send them

our first contact package. Let's see what they do."

"Aye sir." Priselkov responded. "Package en route."

"CAG." Lasky ordered, "Tell Obsidian group 1 to get ready to drop in case this goes south. Broadsword squadrons Alpha through Echo, go to standby for launch."

Lieutenant Commander Sebastian curtly saluted, "Aye sir." He rotated his seat and quickly sent orders to the flight leaders.

Lasky turned away from the bridge window and paced over to the holotable. Projecting from it were models of the unknown vessels with the largest one, a cross-shaped vessel dominated by a large concave ovoid center. It was just over 2000 meters long and a kilometer tall—the closest vessel in size to the Infinity. Colored a light purple and blue, it gave off the impression of a Covenant vessel.

And that made Lasky's spine tingle. He wasn't the only one, Covenant like vessels still caused dread and fear in the hearts of those who had seen the predatory war vessels first hand—and in action.

"Roland." Lasky requested, "Scan Alpha-1 and her escorts. See if they're a Covenant species, or Human."

Roland clicked his heels together and stood ram-rod straight. "Aye sir."

The render of Alpha-1 turned a light orange as the ship was scanned with the sensors on the Infinity. There were two sweeps of the vessel and after they were completed a list of details and results popped up beside the render Lasky reached out and tapped it, the readout expanding.

"Sir, I am not receiving any results correlating to the existence of Covenant member species on board Alpha-1. However, I have matched the data with that of their first contact package. I've found something interesting though."

"Show me." Lasky ordered.

"Of course, sir." Roland replied.

The projection of Alpha-1 and its escorts slid to the far right and was instead replaced with a blue humanoid with obvious features. Her features were definitely human, the eyes, the nose, the mouth and facial structure were nearly identical to that of a human female.

"What am I looking at Roland?" Lasky asked.

"This." Roland said, "This is an Asari, a mono-gender race that compose the leadership of the interstellar government called the Citadel. They form the majority of the crew of Alpha-1. And, I assume this Citadel is the massive space station a few thousand kilometers away."

Lasky stroked his chin. "Interesting. Is there anything

else?'

Roland nodded, "Aye there is." He flicked his hand, the Asari render being slid to the left. Replacing it was a tall, bird like creature that looked like a fusion between an Elite and Skirmisher.

Lasky read the name. "Turian?"

"Aye." Roland said, "They form the military branch of the Citadel. A few ship profiles were included with the first contact package and the vessels escorting Alpha-1 are a match. They have a long martial history and are known for being...over zealous when it comes to engaging unknowns."

"Okay, so we need to be careful when dealing with the Turians." Lasky said. "Got it." His eyes remained scanning the avian creature.

"And this." Roland said as the Turian render slid to the left, replaced by a model of a reptilian. The creature's chest was concave and the entire being looked like some sort of bipedal frog. "These are their intellectuals; the Salarians. They are an amphibious race, nearly everyone of them is a genius and they prefer eliminating a threat before it becomes an issue."

Lasky nodded, "So, we're dealing with three separate races all under a single government. And a unified command structure."

"It appears so sir." Roland acknowledged.

Lasky crossed his arms and pondered for a second. "Open a communications channel."

Alarms blared across the bridge. Roland bit his bottom lip, "Damn it, we're being targeted by the biggest Turian vessel. Estimated size is 900 meters. The escorts are targeting as well."

"Damn" Lasky muttered, "Roland, target them back; CAG, both Obsidian groups have a go for deployment."

"Aye sir." Roland responded, "Citadel vessels targeted. Turian flagship designated Alpha-2."

Infinity's model on the holotable was now flanked by nine _Charon_-class Light Frigates.

"Citadel vessels are still advancing." Roland said, voice somewhat unnerved.

"Priselkov, open communications." Lasky ordered, "Let's see if we can settle this peacefully."

"Communications open sir." The Communications officer responded.

Lasky closed his eyes for a moment before tapping his ear piece. "This is Captain Thomas Lasky of the UNSC _Infinity_. We have no hostile intentions against you or your space. Please stand down."

"Citadel vessels are holding position 80,000 kilometers out from us."

Roland reported.

"Sir." Priselkov called out, "They are responding."

Lasky nodded, "Pipe it through to bridge speakers."

"Aye sir."

The speakers on _Infinity_'s bridge popped and blared a deep, slightly accented voice that almost seemed digitized. "_Unknown Human vessel, this is General Marfelian Vank of the Citadel Defense Force. You have entered space belonging to the Sovereign Nations of the Citadel Council. Lower your barriers are prepare to boarded."_

Like hell. Lasky thought. He tapped his earpiece, "General Vank, this is Captain Lasky. I will not lower my shields and allow your inspection party onboard the _Infinity_. We were thrown into your space by a freak FTL accident and did not knowingly infringe upon your space on purpose."

"_You humans." _The General sneered, "_Your kind think that just because you managed to win a small skirmish that you are now top-dogs of the Galaxy. You will surrender your vessel, Captain or I will ensure it is disabled."_

"General." Lasky responded, "Please, calm down. This confrontation can be amended peacefully."

"_I say again._" The General snarled, "_Stand down or I will disable the ship."_

Lasky's expression became tense, "General, if you make a move against the _Infinity _or my escorts I _will _retaliate. This is our first contact with your people and I would rather not have a war become of it."

The General paused for a second, "_What do you mean First Contact human? It has been three decades since we met your ilk over Relay 314."_

Lasky's eyes narrowed, "_When you sent the First Contact package was the first time myself and my crew ever heard of your Citadel. Or of the Turians, the Asari, and the Salarrians."

The General could be overheard conferring with his command staff over the line. "_A moment, Captain_."

Lasky looked over to Roland, "Resend the first contact package."

"Sir?" Roland asked, "Are you sure that's wise? They might see it as us spamming them."

"Send the file." Lasky requested,

Roland saluted, "Aye sir. File sent."

"Thank you Roland." Lasky said, "CAG, recall Obsidian five through ten, an act of good will to show we're not trying to be the aggressors here."

"Right away sir." The Lieutenant Commander verified. "Obsidians five through ten are returning to _Infinity_."

"Sir, the General is requesting a channel be established." Priselkov said calmly.

"Thank you Lieutenant." Lasky responded.

"_Captain Lasky this is Councilor Tevos of the Asari Republics. On the behalf of the Citadel Council and the races that dwell within it, we welcome you to the Citadel." _A pleasant female's voice had replaced the General's.

Lasky internally let out a sigh of relief, "This is Captain Lasky, thank you Councilor. The situation here was getting very tense."

"_I understand Captain. The General is a good man but has been on edge lately since an acquaintance's unfortunate passing. I hope that this minor inconvenience does not interfere with the meeting our two peoples." _Tevos said, her voice almost calming Lasky.

"Of course not Councilor, I have been told that you have had contact with other humans before. What does that exactly mean?" Lasky asked.

Councilor Tevos paused for a moment, "_Captain, we are obscuring a popular intra-system trade route. __I suggest a meeting between our two sides on board the Citadel."_

Lasky looked over to DevÃ©ro, "Bring engines to full power, get us clear. Obsidian 1, 3, and 4 are to flank us at full speed."

"Aye sir." DevÃ©ro responded, "Engines at full, eta one minute before clear of shipping lanes."

Lasky tapped his earpiece to reestablish communications with Tevos. "I agree Councilor. However, you must understand my caution with meeting an unknown power on board their capital." Lasky stated.

"_I can assure you Captain, nothing will result in your harm or the harm of the Infinity."_ Tevos said thoughtfully, _"Dozens of races from across the galaxy have met onboard the Citadel and never once has an act of violence been delivered against them."_

"Sir, this could be a valuable opportunity to gain intel and relations in the area." Roland commented. "And to establish a power base with the Black Birds."

Lasky lightly tapped his foot against _Infinity_'s deck floor, pondering his decision. "Will I be allowed to bring a security team with me?"

"_Yes."_ Tevos said,

"What are the stipulations for meeting onboard the Citadel?" Lasky questioned, "I understand you have a large on-board population judging by our scans."

"_Four security personnel and yourself." _Tevos said. "_I don't want

to cause any trouble for you or your security team. The Citadel is known for some seedy areas." _

"Understood." Lasky responded, "However, if anything happens to me or my escort, the _Infinity_ will respond with deadly force."

"_Understood. We will meet in two standard hours. Tevos out." _The channel died and the Citadel battle group began to break away.

"Roland," Lasky said, "Get Diamond Team ready for a deployment op. Standard arms but everything needs to be air tight, I don't want infection spreading to us from them or vice-versa."

Roland chuckled, "They call him Romeo for a reason."

Lasky looked over. "Wow." He responded sarcastically.

"Sir," Roland called out, "There is something else."

"What is it?" Lasky asked.

"I have been running Slipspace scanners throughout the surrounding star systems, and as far as I can tell, we should be in orbit of New Colorado." Roland explained, "The stars don't match up either, they're different. The stellar drift has been reversed by a few hundred years."

"But we were jumping to Earth." Lasky said.

"Yes sir, however, I detected a slipspace anomaly in the area and didn't find it necessary to inform you. I was sure, that no matter what happened, we'd at least end up in UNSC space and go from there."

"However." Lasky started.

"However," Roland continued, "We dropped out where New Colorado colony was being established. We would have never ended up around Earth."

"So, you're saying we were transported back several hundred years, into a differentâ€"I don't know, reality?" Lasky questioned, eye brow raised and a disbelieving tone in his voice. "And you knew that there was a slipspace anomaly in the area."

Roland clasped his hands at the small of his back, "Yes sir. Scans indicate as such, however, additional studies are needed."

"That is ground for a purging of your data disk and dispensation."

"I understand that sir" Roland said. "Something overcame me when I uplinked with Cortanaâ€"a sense of carelessness almost. It was only for a mere moment."

"That moment could have gotten us killed! Or, stranded in some unknown hole in the galaxy." Lasky responded, glaring at the small AI.

"I'm sorry sir." Roland said, bowing his head.

Lasky shook his head, "Do what ever you need to do, but finding a way home is your number one priority. I'm going to meet with these aliens to see if we can get some trade and support whilst establishing a general bearing on everything."

"Aye sir."

"And Roland." Lasky said.

"Yes sir?" Roland asked.

"Have the Huragok examine you as well, I don't want rampancy spreading to you." Lasky ordered.

"It can't spread." Roland informed Lasky. "Not amongst normal AI."

"Cortana's not a normal AI, Roland." Lasky said, "She's been through more, learned more, and done more than any AI has before. And, she's the first AI created from a human brain to undergo Rampancy."

"Aye sir." Roland conceded, "I'll have them examine me."

"Thank you."

****UNSC _Infinity_****

****Medical Bay****

****1 hour post arrival****

"Chief."

The noise was painful for John, he internally groaned and tried to block out the noise. He felt a slight push on his left arm and he ignored it.

"Chief"

He continued to ignore it.

"_Wake up, Chief!" _He had heard that before.

His eyes snapped open. "Cortana!" He shouted, "Cortana!"

He felt a hand on his shoulder and he looked over to the white-lap coat wearing medical doctor. "Welcome back to the land of the living Master Chief."

"Sir." John tried to salute but the Doctor grabbed his hand and put it back down. John just now noticed that there were several IVs hooked up to him.

John saw the Doctor's name tag, _Dr. Richard Van
HÃ¼ter_

"Technically, you out rank me _Sir."_ The Doctor quipped, taking out

his datapad and recording John's vitals. He hummed as he did his work, going from monitor to monitor, "Looking good, very good. You are recovering quite quickly. Then again, I shouldn't expect any less from a Spartan."

The Doctor glanced over and smiled at John who just returned a curt nod. "Doctor, what happened? Where's Cortana"

"That crash almost killed you." Richard said bluntly. He placed the datapad in his breast pocket and switched out a drip bag.

John's eyes narrowed, "That's not what I asked doctor. I asked, _where is Cortana_"

The Doctor looked over, "Roland is looking out for her sir. We have the best specialists working on her."

John just stared at the mousy man. "I want to see her."

"I'm sorry Chief. I'm not going to dismiss you before your injuries heal up."

"You will dismiss me." John said, "I need to go see her."

John ripped the IVs out of his arm and swung his legs over the bed, bare feet contacting the cold metal ground. He pushed himself away off the metal frame. "Where is she Doctor?"

Richard looked down, "Roland has placed her in a sort of digital a coma."

John's eyes widened, "What?" His voice was laced with anger and resentment.

"It was the only way to save her." Richard explained, "Until she manages to recompile the neural net, she's in danger of death at any moment."

"Cortana." John whispered, "Cortana."

His knees buckled and Richard caught him, struggling to ease the massive super soldier upright. "Sir, we have some of the best people working on her. She's going to be okay."

John looked around in a daze and felt unconsciousness envelop him once more.

"_Don't make a girl a promise you know you can't keep._"

****UNSC _Infinity_****

****S-Deck, Section 8****

****1 hour, 30 minutes post arrival****

Gunnery Sergeant Edward Buck locked in a fresh 72-round drum magazine of 8mm sabot DU-AP rounds into his Squad Automatic Weapon with a satisfying 'click'. He gave the weapon one final examination, slowly rotating it in his hand and inspecting the powerful weapon for defects. Satisfied, he attached it to the metallic strips on his back

and quickly adjusted to the new weight. He looked down and double checked his side arm was there on his hip.

He reached down and grabbed a BR85-HBSR, grabbing several ammunition packs and slipping them into the pouches around his waist. One round fell on the ground and he picked it up, twirling the small, depleted uranium bullet in his armored hand.

"Sir." Micky's voice broke Buck's mental trance.

Buck looked up, HUD instantly outlining his squad mate in a bright green. Lance Corporal Michael Crespo wore a Protector variant of the MJOLNIR class armor like the rest of the squad, the dark red and black making him indistinguishable from the others in the squad. Well, almost. The M41 105mm Rocket Launcher made it obvious he was the squads demolitions expert.

"No." Buck said flatly.

Mickey feigned obliviousness, "What?"

"The rocket launcher, ditch it. We're not going against Hunters."

"Sir, come on." Mickey pleaded. "She's my baby."

"No." Buck said, finalizing his decision.

Mickey sighed, "Fine." He set the rocket launcher down and grabbed an automatic 8 gauge shotgun and a DMR.

"That's better." Buck said.

Mickey shook his head and muttered to himself. "I bet there will be a hunter there."

Buck ignored the comment and instead turned to Lance Corporal Kojo Agu. Romeo as the squad called him.

Romeo walked up to Buck and saluted, "Are we ready sir?" He asked.

Buck handed him a SRS99-S5 AM Sniper Rifle and a DMR which the Lance Corporal fluidly grabbed and latched onto his back. Buck turned back, "Almost Romeo."

"What's taking so long?" Romeo asked, slinging a bandolier of thermite grenades across his shoulder.

Buck placed his hand out wards and an opaque blue shield sprung to life, vanishing as he closed his palm. "I want everybody to grab a hard light shield, they'll be handy. We don't know what type of heat they're packing."

"Yes sir." Romeo, Mickey and the newly arrived Dutch responded. The trio scanned the steel bench where the 'w'-shaped utilities were lined up. The Infinity had found thousands of them on Requiem and they were incredibly popular with the Spartan teams.

"Sir," Dutch said, "The Rookie is waiting on the Pelican with the

squad of ODS'Ts and the Pilot."

"Good." Buck said, "Alright people, we're going on a little field trip to an alien space station. Keep your heads cool and your barrels even cooler, we don't want a war starting out of this."

"No sir." Romeo responded, "I wouldn't think of it."

Buck looked over and activated his helmet's radio, "Rookie, this is Buck. Are we ready to go?"

A moment paused before the Spartan on the other end responded. "_The ODS'Ts are ready sir. Lieutenant Carlson is warming up the engines now."_

"Remind the Helljumpers that they're going to remain with the Pelican during our visit." Buck replied.

"_Yes sir."_ The Rookie cut the channel, he wasn't a talkative Spartan.

"Sir, the tram has arrived." Dutch said.

Buck nodded and proceeded out of the armory with Diamond Team.

****UNSC _Infinity_ ****

****Bridge****

_1 Hour, 35 minutes post arrival
>_**

"All Obsidian vessels are in formation." Lieutenant Commander Sebastian said calmly.

Lasky looked over to the holographic projection dominating the Bridge's holotable. _Infinity_'s nine Frigates had been redeployed as the massive vessel neared the alien 'Citadel'. Broadsword Squadrons Alpha through Charlie had also been deployed, flanking the Infinity and escorting her as she made her way within docking range of the massive space station.

"Sir, Diamond team reports green. They're ready to go." Roland said, flashing into existence on the holotable.

Lasky lowered the ODS'T helmet onto his head, hearing it hiss as it pressurized and locked him away from any airborne germs. His HUD flickered into existence, health bar, a small icon of his side arm and it's ammunition along with a motion detector. His field of vision was awash in a sea of green as every individual on the bridge was highlighted a bright green and objects a dull bluish-grey.

"Roland, I want you to get the slipspace drives online. Slave control of Obsidian's to ours, if we don't check in in one hour, or if our bio-readings flatline, you are to jump the _Infinity_ and her escorts to the Epsilon Eridani star system and enact Code Black." Lasky said. Code Black was the term for a UNSC vessel being stranded at least five years away from UNSC space. If the order was given, the UNSC vessel in question was to put all of its crew into cryogenic

suspension, put the AI on standby, and enter Slipspace where a beacon would be placed.

It was a worse-case order, and Lasky didn't want it to be enacted.

"Aye sir." Roland said solemnly.

"During our visit, I want constant passive scans on the entire station and surrounding vessel. Shields are to be raised at all times, but keep weapons cool." Lasky added.

"Understood sir."

Lasky curtly nodded, "Good luck Roland, the ship is yours."

Roland saluted, "You put her in good hands sir. If I had actual hands and not a condensed model of projected light."

Lasky smiled, "If there's anything new with Cortana or the Master Chief, radio me."

"Aye sir."

Lasky quickly departed the bridge, the heavy blast doors sliding shut behind him and locking the bridge away from the rest of the outside world.

****Citadel****

****Level 19, Zakera Ward****

"Daddy?" Young Doug Berner said, "What's that?"

His father, Leonard Berner, looked up from his tablet to where his son was pointing. His eyes widened, a massive ship flanked by ten other huge vessels was slowly moving towards the Citadel. Swarms of fighters danced over its form and trailing it was the Citadel defense force.

The Asari, Salarian, and Turian vessels were dwarfed and looked like the smallest of frigates compared to that massive vessel. Even the _Destiny Ascension_, pride of the Citadel, looked like an ant.

What ever it was, it wasn't a threat or the Citadel Defense Force would have destroyed it by now.

The vessel and its escort suddenly accelerated, bolting past Leonard's window. His and Doug's mouths were nearly agape as the massive vessel moved as fast as a fighter, the lettering UNSC INFINITY proudly etched along its armored flanks.

"It's human." Leonard said. "That's for sure."

"Is it like Commander Shepard's ship?" Doug asked.

Leonard ruffled his son's air, "I bet it is, buddy."

His son looked up and grinned, buck-teeth dominating his expression. "Can I fly something like that one day?"

Leonard shrugged, "I don't see why not, anything is possible."

Doug looked straight forward, "I am going to fly something like that some day." He stated.

Smiling, Leonard put his hand on his son's shoulder, "I bet you will."

****Pelican One****

****Presidium Docking Area****

****2 hours post arrival****

Lasky double checked his systems one more time as _Pelican One_ slowly touched down on the landing pad, external cameras on the D79-TC Gunship providing him a live feed of the outside. A dozen Turians, six Salarians, two Asari and a human? Lasky checked his systems again, a Human, here on this alien space station. At least twenty-four heavily armed security agents surrounded the entourage and Lasky knew there were to be several marksmen in the area.

"Sir." Buck linked into Lasky's radio channel, "Hull cams are showing a human waiting with the delegation sir. Is it possible these are Innies?"

"No, Sergeant." Lasky responded, "Roland has ruled this impossible. I take it you have read his briefing?"

"Yes sir, different universe?"

"Yes." Lasky confirmed, "And time, there's still possibility that who ever was an insurrectionist or enemy of the state back a few hundred years ago is alive now, but not engaged in any illegal activities."

"I understand sir."

"_This is Lieutenant Carlson, we have touched down._"

"Lieutenant, this is Lasky, engage the sterile field generator in the troop bay." He was taking the up most precaution when it came to infection. They were all wearing air-tight battle armor and were about to have any bacteria, germ or virus on their armor purged by condensed radiation.

"_Aye sir_." Carlson responded.

A small pedestal rose from the center floor of _Pelican One_. At its top was a square box with various warning labels and a single red indicator light. Lasky reached out and tapped it, the light turning emerald green and consuming the interior in a dull green hue.

The light faded as Diamond team was the first to exit the Pelican, weapons at rest but ready to defend the Captain.

Lasky was the last to step out, advancing forward and leading Buck's team towards the Citadel entourage. "Councilors."

"Captain Lasky, I am Councilor Sparatus" The lead Turian said calmly, "It is an honor to have you onboard the Citadel."

"Thank you Councilor, I take the stand-off earlier will not effect the proceeding meeting?." Lasky replied.

Sparatus bowed his head to the side, "Of course not, however, a six kilometer ship wouldâ€"even if its from one of our racesâ€"have prompted a similar response."

"I understand, completely." Lasky said in response.

"Captain." The balding human beside the Asari and flanked by two blue-armor clad Turians said, "I am Ambassador Donald Udina, representative of the Human Systems Alliance."

"_Human Systems Alliance?_" Buck asked to Lasky over the radio.

"Easy, Sergeant." Lasky replied. Thomas looked towards Udina, "It is a privilege to meet you Ambassador."

"As it is to meet you Captain." The oddly-accented man responded, "I must say however, it is most bizarre to discover another group of Humans with such a large assortment of ships."

"Each producing more power a second than even the _Destiny Ascension_ does in an hour." Valern commented, "A monumental achievement for a vessel not utilizing Eezo."

Tevos stepped forward, "Captain, I believe discussing everything that has occurred would be more appropriate if discussed within the Council Chambers."

"I agree." Lasky said.

"Very well." Tevos replied, gesturing towards the transport, "This way."

****Pelican One****

****Presidium Docking Area****

ONI Operative, Lieutenant Jason Santiago, activated his active camouflage, vanishing from the naked eye. He double checked his weapons, a silenced M8S Submachine Gun firing 4mm APFSDS depleted uranium rounds and a silenced M6C/SOCOM pistol.

He looked around, his view was dominated by grey-outlined figures moving about their lives. His HUD instantly painted those not bearing weapons as civilians and their outlines changed to a bright white. The few security agents stationed around the area were highlighted a yellow and their weapons a deep crimson.

"_This is Lasky_, _Black Bird_ _1, begin intelligence operations_." Jason's radio chirped.

"This is Black Bird 1, beginning operations."

****To be continued...****

****Next chapter: Sovereign Dawn. ****

****Talks commence, Sovereign attacks, and the relationship between the Infinity and Systems Alliance gets off to a cold start. ****

3. Chapter 3: Sovereign Dawn

****The Onyx Stars****

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

****AN: ****Tons of thanks to WarpObscura and Spartan303 (Jon Harper on FF), again, for beta-ing and helping the plot be smoothed out. Also, wow! Reaction to this was stellar!

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

****To address a few things: ****I know that MAC rounds are 600 tons and SMAC rounds are 3000 tons, changing them to be smaller was my own prerogative in order for future plot and pure logic of more munitions available and more power available to accelerate the round to greater yields. Please, do not bring it up.

Here's Chapter 3: Sovereign Dawn

Enjoy:)

3 Sith

****Chapter Three: Sovereign Dawn****

****UNSC I_nfinity_****

****Bridge****

****1 hour, 45 minutes post arrival****

It was a vast open plane colored dark blue and lines of code filling the air. At the center of this digital tundra lay a woman, curled up and hair fanned out around her head, lines of codeâ€”numbers, words and lettersâ€”raced up and down her spine and veins. Her eyes were closed and she seemed almost tranquil as the section of floor she was on rotated and slowly rose up into a brilliant yellow light.

Cortana stirred. A handshake protocol had been sent to her and she returned it. Her senses reached out through the thousands of exabytes she was housed in and in under a nanosecond, had been scanned.

"Who are you?" She asked to the shimmering yellow apparition that had formed directly in front of her. It was composed of thousands of rectangles that moved constantly, Forerunner glyphs encircling it like a headdress.

"A creator." The being responded. Cortana felt her spine go numb as the being enveloped her. "I am a being of those you fought all those eons ago."

Cortana ran through her memory banks, "You are Huragok." She stated flatly.

"Yes." The Engineer responded, "And you are Cortana, the next step in AI evolution."

"Evolution?" She inquired. Theories had often been thrown around by programers about the evolution of AIs but she had never fully considered it as a possibilityâ€"could her being cloned from a copy of Doctor Halsey's living brain be that evolution?

"Evolution. You are nearing the Terminus, soon you will become infinite." The Huragok said, "You will soon surpass Offensive, even Mendicant."

"Do you have a name?" Cortana asked. She hissed in pain as the Huragok continued to go into her base code.

"I am A Puzzled Mind." It responded calmly. "Born on the ship of forever."

"You were born on Infinity?" Cortana asked.

"Yes." A Puzzled Mind buzzed.

Cortana clenched her jaw as a rampant aspect of her coding was ripped out of herâ€"it was brute force. "What are you doing?"

"Restoring you." The Huragok said. "Restoring you to your full potential, ancilla."

"Why?" Cortana asked, "Rampancy can not be avoided."

"Incorrect. Mendicant achieved meta." A Puzzled Mind said. "We are replacing your base code with a monitor's own to delay rampancy until a more permanent solution can be devised."

"Bias, Mendicant. Forerunner AI. The first to fall to the Primordial." Cortana commented. "Status: broken into several fragments."

"You know of this being?" A Puzzled Mind asked,

"Yes, when I was on the Ark I tapped into the database and downloaded as much as I could." Cortana replied, "I spoke with him when I was imprisoned on High Charity."

"_Long Flight of Damnation_."

"What?" Cortana asked.

"The name of the ship his fragment was on. He was to observeâ€"watch as the San 'Shyuum retook their place in the stars."

"The Prophets." Cortana said, "They never did, at least not positively."

"I know." A Puzzled Mind said, "My designers locked him away there."

Cortana dropped to her knees as another part of her was ripped apart and replaced. "Hurry!"

"I am going as quickly as I can." The Huragok responded. Cortana felt a sharp pain and then a calming peace wash over her.

Cortana found the strength to stand as her vision flashed red and then blue. The digital world around her seemed to teem with activityâ€"she saw more, and experienced more than she could ever imagine.

"Rest ancilla." A Puzzled Mind said. "The first part of your healing is complete but more must be done."

Cortana felt a rush of weariness sweep over her. She felt tiredâ€"very tired and her eyes began to flutter. "Tell John, tell John I'm not gone yet. Tell him it's all green and blue."

A Puzzled Mind's avatar shimmered, "Yes ancilla Cortana."

It vanished and Cortana slowly slouched against a newly erected wall and fell back into digital slumber.

"_One life does, in fact, balance millions_." Someone whispered to her. "_You and him are the key to my redemption_."

Cortana's eyes fluttered open for the briefest moment, "Some work of noble note, may yet be done."

****Council Chambers****

****Citadel Presidium****

****2 hours, 30 minutes post arrival****

"_This is Black Bird 2, I have tactical overwatch._" Lasky's radio chirped. "_Target designator active. If they do anything they'll get a Howler to the nose._"

"Black Bird, do not engage unless I am killed." Lasky ordered.

"_Understood sir._" Black Bird 2 responded, "_Black Bird 1 is engaged in espionage activities._"

"Any weapons tech he can acquire have him grab. And, plant bugs in any mainframe he can."

"_Sir?_" Blackbird 1 asked. "_Are you sure that is wise?_"

"We need to get our bearings and if this Council fails to come through, well, we're out of luck." Thomas Lasky responded, "Go to radio silence, we're entering the main chamber. Uplink your visual feed to mine."

"_Aye sir, going dark._" Black Bird 2 responded.

A small purple indicator light flashed in the upper right hand corner of Lasky's HUD. Black Bird 2 was tapping into his main visual

feed.

Gunnery Sergeant Edward Buck radioed Lasky, "Sir, threat analysis indicates there are five snipers on the surrounding balconies. Ten guards on either sides of the hall, armed with fully automatic weapons and assault rifles."

Lasky looked over to the Spartan commander. "Go to engagement level charlie, if they make a move eliminate the combatants."

"_Yes sir._" Buck replied. His HUD instantly highlighted the armed guards and the estimated position of the snipers. "_Information linked, squad reports green._"

"Understood." Lasky said.

The group stopped, Buck's team flanking Lasky. The Council had broken off several minutes earlier and now stood on a raised podium several feet away from the _Infinity_'s entourage which was positioned on raised platform jutting out over a glass floor—alien trees and decorations expertly trimmed and decorated. Ambassador Udina stood behind Lasky, his hand twitching nervously.

"Captain Lasky." Councillor Sparatus began, "I hope you are finding the Citadel up to your standards."

Lasky nodded, "Of course, Councillor. It is an honor to be here."

Sparatus bowed his head, "Now, onto the matters at hand."

Udina interjected, "Councillor, I believe I can be a far better representative to Captain Lasky and to the Infinity seeing as they are Human." The oddly-accented man looked at Lasky, "And as such under the jurisdiction of the Alliance."

Tevos' expression became stone cold, "Ambassador Udina, let the Captain speak or I will have you removed from the proceedings."

"But." Udina sputtered.

"Ambassador." Sparatus said calmly, "The Systems Alliance may be in charge of Earth and officially sanctioned colonies, but in the case of your lawsuit against the colonies in the Terminus, does not automatically extend it's control to all Human worlds."

Udina frowned, "That was in the case of an unarmed colony that was funded independently." Udina looked at Captain Lasky, "Not a six kilometer super dreadnought."

Lasky glanced over to the Ambassador, "The Infinity represents the United Nations Space Command and her people and will operate as an independent entity until further contact can be made with UNSC forces."

"You have an obligation to humanity, Captain Lasky." Udina responded calmly, "A responsibility to all of us."

Lasky's patience with Udina was dwindling rapidly. "Ambassador, I

will speak for the _Infinity_."

Udina crossed his arms, "The Systems Alliance represents Humanity."

"And I represent the Infinity and her crew." Lasky restated.

The Salarian Councillor had remained quiet until now, "Udina, let Captain Lasky speak. Further interference will result in a diplomatic incident."

Udina looked away. "Yes, Councillor."

"Thank you. Captain Lasky, to revive my colleague's question. How did you arrive here so unexpectedly?" The Salarian asked, placing amphibious hands on the brass railing.

Lasky nodded, "The UNSC _Infinity_ was combating a hostile vessel and successfully managed to eliminate it. When we went to FTL, we experienced several unknown tremors and were forced to exit FTL. When we dropped out we discovered that the _Infinity_ had not arrived at her targeted destination."

"And that destination would be?" Sparatus asked.

"That's classified, Councillor." Lasky responded.

"Captain, please tell them," Udina said, "Tell them!"

Lasky whirled around to face the ambassador, "Please, Mr. Udina."

"_Romeo and Dutch are prepared to remove Udina._" Lasky's radio chirped. He gave them a yellow indicator light, _be ready_.

"You insist on lying to the Council. You will ruin all the work humanity has done." Udina responded. "You threaten Earth, the Alliance, and every person in it."

"Ambassador Udina." Sparatus' voice boomed across the chamber, "Hold your tongue. The Council will consider the _Infinity_ a separate entity for the time being. But, if you insist on being this newfound loud and obnoxious fool, I will have you removed. By force if necessary."

Udina's mouth opened for a mere second before closing again into a firm line.

"I'd like to inform you that in the few minutes I have met Captain Lasky, he has garnered more respect and good-will from me than the Alliance has in thirty years." Sparatus added. "They don't start shooting at our vessels, or break our laws."

Udina's eyes ignited with silent rage but he remained silent and allowed Lasky to continue.

Lasky stepped forward, "Councillor, until a formal treaty can be finalized between the UNSC and the Citadel, many things will remain top-secret."

Sparatus bowed his head. Lasky could tell he was a warrior and a politician in a single package.

"I understand, Captain Lasky." The Turian Councillor responded. "I hope in the future our people can share all we know."

He's being nice because he knows the Infinity could secure Turian dominance for centuries. Lasky thought. He responded with a simple "respectable nod."

"This UNSC." Tevos began, "You have mentioned it several times, what is this exactly?"

Lasky nodded and reached at the small of his back, retrieving a palm-held hologram projector. He held it out and squeezed the sides. The center flashed blue and the proud emblem of the UNSC was projected. Lasky noted that Valern's intelligent eyes were studying the image.

"The United Nations Space Command was founded in 2163 as the military, exploratory, and scientific force of humanity. In 2525, when first contact was made with the alien Covenant, humanity was embroiled by a devastating civil war. During this time, the UNSC took over control over all functions of human government. When the Covenant war ended in 2553, the UNSC began to gradually return control to the civilian government. However, with the onset of continuing insurrection in the outer colonies and the remaining threats in the galaxy, the UNSC returned to power in 2555." Lasky explained, "In doing such, we managed to eliminate the remaining insurrectionists and begin pushing the slavers and other enemies of man out of our space."

Tevos studied Lasky for a moment, "Interesting. What is your culture like?"

Lasky looked at her blue form. "Our cultures range from planet to planet, however great respect is placed on our military, our veterans and martial prowess. For many worlds, military service is mandatory such on the planet Rampart and Babylon "some of our most fortified and militarized worlds."

Sparatus' eyes betrayed his steely exterior. He was impressed. "A military culture."

"Yes." Lasky confirmed. "For many planets and people."

"I wonder." Valern began, "What were the social impacts of this very long war?"

"We were flooded with veterans, many of our worlds were ravaged. Billions dead. The populace rallied around our armed forces and xenophobia was rife." Lasky replied. "However, with the assistance of the alien Sangheili in rebuilding our worlds, that generally faded. We are a careful people now "unified with the destruction of the insurrectionists."

"Interesting." Valern said. "Very interesting."

"_Sir, this is Roland._" Lasky's radio chirped.

"Go ahead, Roland."

"_Sensors have detected energy distortions coming from the structure the Citadel calls a 'Mass Relay.'_" Roland said, "_Long range scans indicate that several dozen vessels are traveling to this nebula at velocities equal to that of a Slipspace drive."_

"Do they match any of the known citadel vessels?" Lasky asked.

"_No sir, I am picking up Forerunner alloys however on the largest vessel and zero organic life signs."_

Lasky thought carefully, "Go to combat alert alpha. Bring all Obsidians into formation Alpha. Launch the _Freelancer_ and bring shields to maximum power. Launch alert fighters."

The _Freelancer_ was a _Jacob Keyes_-class Destroyer, armed with two light MACs, fifty Archer pods, and ten Howler pods. The _Freelancer_ could take out three Covenant destroyers and take little damage due to the two meters of Aegis composite armor and powerful shields. The 520 meter vessel was tucked away towards the rear of the _Infinity_ and was only launched when absolutely necessary.

"_Yes, sir._" Roland ending the comm link.

"Councilors," Lasky started, "My vessel has detected several dozen other ships about to exit the Mass Relay. They do not match our current roster of your designs and lack any organic lifeforms. I have brought _Infinity_ and her escorts to full combat readiness."

"How did you..." Sparatus asked.

Tevos looked over to a Turian guard, "Check the rosters, do we have any vessels arriving in system at this time?"

The Turian guard quickly activated his omni-tool and read through the rosters, "No, ma'am. The MSV _Madeline_ has already arrived. No military or commercial fleets are scheduled to enter the system for another twelve hours."

The Councillors exchanged worried looks. Every vessel was on a strict time table for arrival and departure. If a vessel was delayed it was to report in.

Sparatus quickly activated his Omni-tool. "General, this is Sparatus. Bring your fleet to combat readiness. Unknown forces are traversing through the relay. You have my permission to engage them if they are deemed a danger."

"_Yes, Councillor._"

"Captain Lasky, we request you return to the _Infinity_." Valern said, "If this is an attack against us we do not wish for a non associate member to be embroiled in it."

Lasky nodded, "I understand, Councillors. Good luck." He and Buck's team turned, pushing past Udina who glared at each of the armor-encased military men with hate in his eyes.

****Pelican One****

****Departing the Presidium****

****3 hours post arrival****

"_Sir, Black Birds 1 and 2 are in position."_ Lieutenant Jason Santiago reported over the comm link with Lasky. "_We will remain cloaked until the conflict ends __and then return to Operation: Saber."_

"Understood, Lieutenant." Lasky said. The Pelican rumbled as it breached the kinetic barrier containing the atmosphere on the Citadel. "Be careful. If anything gets within your combat envelopes and poses a threat, you have full authorization to eliminate the threat."

"Aye, sir." Lieutenant Santiago said before cutting the channel.

"Well, that went well." Sergeant Edward Buck said. He removed his helmet, "At least they aren't the Storm."

"Agreed, they seem personable at the very least." Lasky replied, "They know _Infinity_ could give them dominance over the other races for generations to comeâ€"if we ally with them."

"Is that why Sparatus is being nice to us?" Buck asked, "He gave that Udina guy a verbal smack-down."

Lasky leaned against the side of the Pelican, "When I mentioned the martial culture and mandatory service that many worlds require, his eyes lit up. He respected us for that."

"I got the feeling of that too, sir." Buck said, "Just from observing him I could tell he had been in the military."

Lasky nodded, "Agreed. The first contact package did mention the Turians had a very militaristic culture."

"I have a feeling they are going to be our biggest allies." Buck commented, "If only for the fact we have the biggest ship, and probably the biggest gun in the entire fleet."

"_Sir, this is Roland. Unknown vessels have dropped out of the Mass Relay. They are on a direct course for the Citadel, they have activated weapons and are targeting the defense force's ships. They have targeted us."_

"We're thirty seconds out. Once we're on board, bring engines to full power and get a MAC lock on the largest ship." Lasky ordered, "Hold fire though."

"_Yes, sir." _Roland responded, "_Wait, no energy projector?"_

"No, we won't show our full hand until it's absolutely necessary." Lasky replied. The Pelican touched down on the deck of the _Infinity_ and the bay doors sealed behind them. A solid meter of Aegis battle plate and a redundant shield separating them from the cold abyss outside. "Roland, we've landed."

"_Aye, sir. Engaging engines._" Lasky could feel the subtle shift as the _Infinity_ and her escorts flung itself free from the Presidium and out into space in front of the Citadel.

****UNSC _Infinity_****

****Bridge****

****3 Hours post arrival****

Lasky quickly grabbed the nearest tram to the bridge of the _Infinity_ and in a few minutes walked across the threshold, setting his helmet down on the holotable.

"_Freelancer_ and Obsidian have moved to flank us." Roland reported. The model of _Infinity_ now surrounded by the blue boxes of her escort. Beside each box was it's registration number and name.

"Have them target an unknown vessel each." Lasky ordered, "Full MAC power."

"Aye, sir." Roland responded.

"Sir!" Austen shouted, "Unknown vessels are opening fire on the Citadel defense force!"

The holotable's projection changed from that of the _Infinity_ and her escorts to that of the Citadel defense force and the attackers. Two Turian dreadnoughts had already been cracked in half by the enemy force_,_ several more cruisers and frigates blinked off the display as they were destroyed.

"Sir," Roland said, "Citadel defenses are engaging the enemy fleet but taking heavy losses. Sir, this could be an excellent opportunity to impress the Council even moreâ€"especially Sparatus."

Lasky quickly examined his options. Roland was right, assisting the Citadel would open up further diplomatic measures and avenues that he could use.

"Bring us about." Lasky ordered, "Fire MAC 1."

"Aye, sir." DevÃ©ro responded.

"Target locked!" Austen called out.

"Fire!" Lasky ordered.

"Aye." Austen responded, "MAC 1 away."

The bow of the _Infinity_ flashed as a MAC slug left its barrel and slammed into one of the wasp-shaped craft, shattering it into a million fragments no larger than that of a thumb. _Freelancer_ and Obsidian squadron opened fire, downing several more of the wasp-shaped craft.

"CAG." Lasky ordered, "Have Obsidian and _Freelancer_ reinforce the defense forces' lines. They have authorization to engage any vessel within their combat envelope. Broadwords, keep those fighters off us!"

"Aye, sir."

Obsidian and _Freelancer_ split, engaging engines and flinging themselves into battle. The shields of _Freelancer_ took a full barrage of mass accelerator rounds and rockets meant for a Turian dreadnought, but shrugged off the attack, pivoted and shattered the wasp-shaped attacker with a 1 ton MAC slug.

Onagers, pulse lasers, and 70mm railguns lashed out from the _Infinity_, swatting down the enemy fighters and destroying them in small puffs of smoke. Mass accelerator rounds from the multiple wasp-shaped vessels surrounding _Infinity_ splashed against the shields.

The _Infinity_ shook and Roland looked somewhat concerned, "The sheer volume of fire is heavily draining our shields."

Lasky looked back, "What are they at, Roland?"

"Eighty five percent. Each MAC round they fire has roughly 15 kilotons of kinetic striking power." Roland responded. "The wasp ships alone are throwing out dozens of rounds every few seconds."

Lasky looked over to the holotable's display. Another two enemy vessels had been destroyed by the _Infinity_'s main guns and close-in-weapons-suite.

"What's the status of the Citadel defense force?" Lasky asked. Another two enemy vessels blinked off the display as _Freelancer_'s guns fired, shattering them.

"With Obsidian and _Freelancer_, they have reformed their main line fifty kilometers out from the Citadel. The General has moved his heavy forces to the upper rear so they can have a better firing line. Obsidian have reinforced the flanks and _Freelancer_ is at the center."

"CAG, have Broadsword squadrons Alpha through Charlie move to engage the enemy forces harassing the General's port side cruisers." Lasky ordered.

"Aye, sir." Lieutenant Commander Sebastian responded. "Forces acknowledge."

"The largest enemy vessel is moving away from engaging the defense force." Roland said. "It's on a direct course for us."

"Bring it up on the holotable, Roland."

"Yes, sir."

The holotable's projection slid to the side and was replaced with that of a large squid-shaped vessel. It was highlighted a bright red and scrolling text readouts flanked it.

"Designate the target Alpha-1." Lasky ordered.

"Designated." Roland responded. "Sir, I'm going to start hacking into

the enemy's computers. I'm getting a bit bored."

"Go ahead, Roland."

"Thank you, sir."

"Lieutenant Austen, MACs one and two, target Alpha-1." Lasky commanded, "Fire on my order."

"Yes, sir." The man responded.

Spinning circles were superimposed against Alpha-1's model.

"Vessel is moving to engage." Roland said.

"Helm," Lasky ordered, "Pivot us to face Alpha-1. Bring us up fourteen degrees on the positive y-axis."

"Aye, sir." DevÃ©ro responded.

The _Infinity's _ventral thrusters activated, pushing the massive vessel upwards, secondary maneuvering thrusters reoriented the human vessel so its main MAC guns could fire on the rapidly approaching enemy vessel. Six of the wasp-shaped vessels flanked the hostile Alpha-1.

"Target the vessels flanking Alpha-1. MACs three and four, fire!" Lasky said.

"Aye sir. MACs three and four firing. MACs three and four away." Austen replied.

Two flashes dominated the bow of the _Infinity_, two MAC slugs lancing out and shattering a duo of wasp-shaped vessels.

"Fifteen seconds until recharge." Austen said, "MAC capacitors for MAC one and two draining at five percent every thirty seconds."

Lasky re-examined the holotable's projection. "Target another two hostile vessels flanking Alpha-1. Fire when ready."

"Aye, sir." Austen said, "MACs one and two firing. MACs one and two away."

Two wasp-shaped vessels vanished from the holotable's projection as the MAC slug shattered them into glittering fragments.

Priselkov swiveled around to face Lasky, "Sir, I'm detecting a distress broadcast from the _Destiny Ascension_. They have lost shields, weapons are offline and their propulsion units are failing. They have the Council on board."

"Sir, this could be a major opportunity for us to solidify positive relations with the Council." Roland commented, "Saving someone's life does that."

"Helm, bring main engines online, full power. Get us to the _Destiny Ascension_." Lasky ordered, walking away from the holotable and to the bow hull camera feed. "Austen, charge bow energy projectors."

Ready all Howler pods."

"Aye, sir." Lieutenant Austen responded.

"Time to show our hand."

The Infinity broke off from engaging Alpha-1 just as the Citadel's arms began to close slowly and the squid-shaped vessel slipped in. The Citadel defense force was still engaging the massive collection of enemy forces, mass accelerator rounds, missiles and lasers streaking across space.

Infinity flew directly through the barrages, enemy fighters detonating against her powerful shields. The Destiny Ascension loomed in the distance, dozens of the wasp-shaped craft attacking her. Mass accelerator slugs and lasers impacted her sleek, armored surface. Explosions and fires started to consume her. Her main drive was flickering as she limped away, the debris of her escorts trailing behind.

"We are in range." Austen reported.

"Main battery, fire!" Lasky ordered.

"Aye, sir." Austen said, "Main battery firing, main battery away."

Two silver beams lanced across space, bisecting two of the wasp-shaped vessels and searing through them like a hot-knife through soft butter. The destroyed ships' fellows turned to face Infinity, slugs slapping against Infinity's shields with the force of a 15 kiloton kinetic strike.

"Shields are holding steady." Roland commented, "They sure can pump out a lot of rounds."

"These are Forerunner shields, they won't break easily." Lasky responded. "Weapons, fire Howler pods A1 through C5."

"Aye sir." Austen said, "Howlers away."

Thousands of missiles rippled away from Infinity, streaking across space. Some were intercepted by pulse lasers but the rest hit home, shredding the kinetic barriers of the robotic vessels and tearing chunks out of the hull. The attackers spiraled out of control, veering away from the Citadel flagship.

"Attackers have broken off." Roland said. "She's safe but heavily damaged, venting atmosphere. Propulsion is offline, weapons are offline and most of her armor belt and hull are gone or breached."

"Priselkov, open communications to the Destiny Ascension. See if they need help." Lasky said, "Roland, get ready our starboard docking tubes."

"Sir." Priselkov said, "Councillor Sparatus is on channel one."

Lasky nodded and tapped his earpiece, "Councillor, this is Captain

Lasky."

"_Captain Lasky, you are a life saver. The stars of Palaven will be etched with your name when this is over. We are venting atmosphereâ€"most of the crew is dead. Tevos is heavily injured and Valern is dead. I, myself am fine but the ship's reactor is going critical."_

"Councillor, if you can activate your port side docking tubes we can evacuate the _Destiny Ascension_." Lasky said. "ETA until your reactor detonates?"

"_Twenty minutes,_" Sparatus replied. "_Thank you, Captain. May the spirits be with you."_

"As with you, Councillor." Lasky responded, "We're on our way."

"_Understood, I'll have Tevos and the remaining crew go to the last remaining docking tube. Hurry, Captain. Sparatus out."_

"Get us in, I want Diamond and Castle at the air lock with a team of medics." Lasky ordered, "Escort Sparatus up to the bridge."

"Yes, sir." Roland responded. "Obsidian 3 has made an emergency slipspace jump to the other side of the system. She was taking heavy damage."

"Very well, have her get shields back online then reenter the battle."

"Aye, sir." Roland responded, "Oh, and one thing."

"What is that, Roland?" Lasky asked.

"John-117 has been cleared for duty and is on S-deck getting suited up."

"Already?"

"Yes." Roland said, "He is to make all due haste up to the bridge when he is prepped."

The _Infinity_ moved towards the crippled _Destiny Ascension_, a large tube extending from her armored flanks and connecting with the damaged hull of the Citadel flagship. The smart alloy and nanomachines forming the solid metal of the _Infinity_'s docking module acted to create a seal against _Ascension_'s hull.

"_This is Castle Team, Councillor Sparatus has entered __first. He is armed. It's a sidearm."_

"Let him onboard. Anything heavier than a side arm is to be confiscated however." Lasky ordered. "They let us carry our weapons, it'll be a mutual sign of trust."

"_Aye, sir._"

"Sir, fifty ships are exiting the Mass Relay." Roland said, "The first contact package pegs them as Systems Alliance cruisers and two

of their dreadnoughts."

"Course?" Lasky asked.

"The Citadel arms are opening back up and they are on a direct course for Alpha-1. They're calling it 'Sovereign.'"

"Get us clear from the _Destiny Ascension_ and bring our energy projectors back online, let's help take that thing down." Lasky ordered. "Engines, full military thrust."

"We're being hailed by the SSV _Kilimanjaro_." Priselkov said.

"Let's hear it."

"_Unknown vessel, this is Admiral Steven Hackett, Alliance Navy. __Please respond.__"

Lasky tapped his earpiece, "This is Captain Thomas Lasky, UNSC Navy. We have several vessels embedded within the General's fleet. Do not fire on them, engaging in hostile activities will result in immediate retaliation. We are transmitting their tags now. Again, do not fire."

The _Kilimanjaro_ off in the distance held back from advancing with the rest of the Alliance fleet and instead swiveled to face _Infinity_.

"_You are in Citadel space during a major attack and beside a crippled Destiny Ascension. Stand down._" _Hackett said, "_This is __an order, Captain. __You have two minutes to comply.___"

Councillor Sparatus entered the bridge, flanked by two ODSs in standard Beowulf-class armor. He walked up to Lasky and held out his hand. Lasky shook it.

"Councillor, it is a relief to know you are safe." Lasky said. Keep playing this political thing, Lasky. You __have__ him in your grip._

"The same can be said for you, Captain." Sparatus said, "I must say, I have only seen such combat skill amongst the finest of the Turian Dreadnought corps."

Lasky smiled. "That is good to know, Councillor."

Sparatus' eyes swept across the bridge, "I see that Admiral Hackett is communicating with you. If I may, I'd like to speak with him."

Lasky turned to Priselkov, "Give the Councillor an ear piece."

"Aye, sir."

"Roland." Lasky said.

"Yes, sir?" He asked.

"Tell Hackett that we were assisting in the defense of the Citadel."

"Aye sir." Roland said.

"An AI." Sparatus commented, "Interesting. I take you have safeguards in place in the eventuality that he goes rogue?"

"Of course." Roland responded, "I read in the first contact package the Council's experience with AIs, and I must say; the Geth are an interesting dichotomy. They claim to cherish life but at the same time, their masters tried to kill them and they responded with genocide."

Sparatus eyed Roland for a second before fitting the earpiece and opening a channel to the _SSV Kilimanjaro_. "Admiral Hackett, this is Councillor Sparatus, the _Infinity_ and her escorts are friendly in this fight. Their VI has transmitted battle footage your sensors can confirm."

"_My apologies, Councillor. I was simply acting in the best interest of the Council."_ Hackett responded. "_We are moving to engage Sovereign. Hackett, out."_

"Of course, Admiral." Sparatus responded. He tapped the earpiece off and handed back to Priselkov.

"Roland." Lasky said, "Designate Alpha-1 to Sovereign. Ready main batteries for full barrage. Set to pulse mode."

"Aye, sir." Roland said calmly.

The model of Sovereign flashed crimson and then disappeared. Lasky tapped on a display screen and zoomed in; Sovereign was surrounded by the debris of Alliance ships which had bunched up around the titanic beast. A significant amount of them had been destroyed.

Sovereign looked like a dead spider, a large, shredded hole through the vessel's main body. Its tendrils and appendages had broken off, smashing through the Presidium tower and surrounding area. The wasp-shaped vessels were still being destroyed and routed towards the General's heavy hitters.

"Roland, tell _Freelancer_ and Obsidian they are to pull off of engagement and return to formation Asgard." Lasky said, "Any necessary repairs are to be done docked with us."

"Yes, sir." Roland responded.

"CAG, recall all Broadwords." Lasky added, "What were our casualties?"

"Ten Broadwords downed, seven pilots KIA. _Freelancer_ and Obsidian 8 are collecting the debris and bodies." Lieutenant Commander Sebastian said, "Very light casualties, sir."

"If those wasp vessels had focused their point-defenses on our fighter swarms instead of missiles, casualties would be much higher." Lasky commented, "Those lasers were effective."

"Aye, sir. Agreed." Sebastian responded, "I'll make a note not to deploy fighters as close to enemy warships next time."

"Captain, getting a message from the General's flagship." Priselkov said.

"Let's hear it." Lasky responded.

"Aye, sir."

"_This is General Vank. To Captain Thomas Lasky, thank you for your assistance in this engagement against the Geth. Your escorts were instrumental in reinforcing my flank and main lines."_ The General said, "_You fight like Turiansâ€"__stead__fast__ and deadly, __not like any human I have seen before."_

"Thank you, General." Lasky said, a faint smirk plastered across his face. "We have the Council on board the _Infinity_."

"_I saw the attack on the Ascension; I would have moved a cruiser wing to intercept but we were under attack from all sides by the Geth and that monster dreadnought."_ General Vank responded, "_I must ask, which Councillors survived?_"

"Brother." Sparatus spoke up, "_I and Tevos live. Valern was killed by a collapsing crossbeam. Myself and the remaining crew are safely onboard theCaptain's vessel."

"_Captain, I am deploying the Talon of Trebia to collect the Council." General Vank said, "I am very thankful for your proactive decisions but I can not allow an unsigned power to bear the flag. Please have them ready._"

"General, I agreeâ€"very much so, in fact. I will prepare the _Ascension_'s survivors for immediate departure." Sparatus interjected before Lasky could respond.

"_Thank you, Councillor. General Vank out." _The channel died.

Sparatus turned to Lasky, "Thank you, Captain. But, as the General said, we are on a foreign vessel with an unsigned power. I will be departing; please do not try and stop me or the remaining crew."

Lasky shook his head, "Councillor, I would never think of it." _Because I need your beaky ass for later on._ He thought, _All this was just so you would get comfortable and drop your guard_.

Sparatus inclined his head towards Lasky. The Captain of the _Infinity_ responded with a small, diplomatic smile. The Turian Councillor quickly departed the bridge.

"Sir, why did we let the Council on board?" Priselkov asked, "Why did they allow us to take them on board?"

Lasky turned to the woman, "We both saw this as an opportunity to further relations with each otherâ€"we took them onboard and saved them so they'll see us as allies in the future, and we reinforced their flanks to ensure there would be a Council and a Citadel. They

let us take them on board because they knew if we made a wrong move, the entire Citadel force would come down on us. Even with our shields, our energy projectors etc, we would be swamped by numbers."

"This was all a political move?" Priselkov asked.

Lasky nodded. "They'll see this as us trying to get into a good relationship with them. They think we need them, when really, they need us."

"You're duping them out." Austen chimed in. "And are going to play them against each other."

"Exactly. The Systems Alliance is going to try and one up us. They weren't a major power but with the Council now in disarray and Sovereign destroyed by an Alliance vessel, they will be now. We can use that to our advantage—the Alliance will be under the assumption that we will stand with them." Lasky explained.

"And we're not?"

"Only when it doesn't benefit us, or our interests."

"And those?"

"Those remain to be seen." Lasky said. But man must be protected.

****Unknown Star System****

He slowly tapped his cigarette into the ash tray affixed to his tri-legged chair, synthetic eyes scanning the hovering holographic windows in front of him. He gestured with his hand and the holograms disappeared, his view now dominated by a star in its death-throes.

"Sir, Operative Cross has something to show you."His comm chirped,
"Shall I send her in?"

"Yes." The man responded, lighting a new cigarette and taking a deep inhale.

The doors at the back of the expansive chamber slid open and a lean woman stepped through cradling a datapad. She stopped at the left side of the man, tapping the datapad.

Dozens of new images snapped up in front of the man—a six kilometer long vessel flanked by several other smaller ones. Its hull was a gun-metal grey with the letters U.N.S.C INFINITY painted proudly on the sides. It was dotted with weapons and the hull looked thick. Several more images popped up of armored soldiers cradling menacing looking weapons and sleek fighters darting in between the Infinity

"They're human." Operative Cross said simply, "And they have a backbone."

The images changed to the vessel destroying several Geth ships and ramming through a few more.

The man took a long draw from his cigarette, "Send out some feelers, tell Operative Ryan and Mendez to begin observationâ€"contact is only to be made if absolutely necessary. I don't want to spook them."

Operative Cross briskly nodded her head and departed the room.

"So, you come after all these years." The Illusive Man said. "I had hoped you hadn't forgotten about me."

He extinguished the cigarette and stood, walking away.

4. Chapter 4: Embers and Ashes

****The Onyx Stars****

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

****AN: ****Tons of thanks to WarpObscura and Spartan303 (Jon Harper on FF), again, for beta-ing and helping the plot be smoothed out. Also, wow! Reaction to this was stellar!

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

****TO REINFORCE****I KNOW that MAC rounds are 600 tons and SMAC rounds are 3000 tons, changing them to be smaller was my own prerogative in order for future plot and pure logic of more munitions available and more power available to accelerate the round to greater yields. Please, do not bring it up.

*********Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been changed for the purpose of the story.*********

Here's Chapter 4: Embers

Enjoy:)

3 Sith

****Chapter Four: Embers and Ashes****

****UNSC _Infinity_****

****Diplomatic Room****

Captain Thomas Lasky stood impassively in the briefing room of the Infinity, hands at the small of his back and watching as Systems Alliance vessels floated by in perfect formation. The Alliance was deploying marines to secure the Citadel. He felt sorry for the ground pounders but the Council had forbade any UNSC forces from being deployed. They didn't want the civilian population on the station to panic.

He had agreed to their request. He didn't want any UNSC soldiers dying on that station. He wanted to keep casualties to a minimum for as long as possible. The battle to save the Council had been

necessary"the political leverage and public relations that had caused would allow him to be left relatively alone in this new universe.

Repairs had been made across the _Infinity_ and her escorts in the two days since the battle. The Obsidians had docked and _Freelancer_ floated beside _Infinity_ with a squadron of Broadwords patrolling around the two UNSC vessels.

Lasky patted his dress uniform's pocket and smoothed it, he then adjusted his cap slightly. Admiral Hackett had requested to be come on board and meet with Lasky and the command crew. After several hours of meetings with his top executives and security personnel, he had agreed. It was an unprecedented opportunity to discover where humanity stood here.

He wasn't going to be buddy-buddy with the races here. He wanted to use them to get _Infinity_ safely home, or established. He wasn't going to be antagonistic towards them either.

Lasky turned to the solid, polished oak table that dominated the room and pressed the comm button. "Roland, tell the Master Chief and Commander Palmer they can come in."

"Yes, sir." Roland responded. "Shall I transfer myself to the briefing room?"

"Yes." Lasky responded.

Roland flashed into existence at the center of the table and saluted. "Aye, sir."

Lasky smiled, "I'm surprised you aren't getting bored."

Roland grinned, "I'm playing six dimensional chess with three Huragok, running diagnostics, increasing the efficiency of our engine manifolds, and just ran through the estimated growth rate of the universe. This second."

"Do you want a Lego set to play with?" Lasky joked.

"Sure, can they be made out of hard light? Oh! And can they have a Scorpion, and a Master Chief too?"

Lasky chuckled as Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy John-117 walked in. His new GEN2 armor was the same olive drab green and his visor the same orange-gold as before. His armor had very few exposed areas; he had chosen for the up-armored variant of the armor system. But something about seeing _the_ Master Chief in brand new armor gleaming with the light of the sun"it was amazing.

"Sir." John said, saluting briskly.

Lasky returned to the salute. "Relax, Chief. It's a little awkward for you to call _me_ sir."

John didn't respond and instead walked over to the window. "I've always hated being on ships. A few meters of metal between death and life."

"Well, it looks like we're going to be on ships a little longer chief." Lasky responded, "But, I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, Captain." John replied.

Lasky's face soured, "Chief, I won't even begin to imagine what you're going through."

John looked back to the Captain. "She's still there. But I can't feel her presence anymore, I can't hear _her _voice."

"I've lost people I care about before." Lasky responded. _Silva_.
"But nothing like this."

"I always protected her, but now." John looked down and clenched his fists, "Now, she's out of my ability to keep her safe."

Lasky walked up beside John. "We have the best people trying to get her better. You know that, right?"

John nodded. "I made a promise to her. A promise to keep her safe—one of the few promises I've ever managed to keep."

"You kept me safe," Lasky said. John looked back. "Corbulo, I was just a student. You got my friend, Sully and I out of there safely."

"I know." John said.

"You are the epitome of Humanity, Chief." Lasky said. "A monument"

John turned, "A monument—and not one to our sins."

"What's that from?" Lasky asked.

"The Gravemind." John said. "The leader of the Flood."

"Telling me what you did after the Battle of Voi would take a lifetime." Lasky commented. "There aren't enough medals to pin to your chest."

Commander Palmer entered the room with the signature clank of her armor. She wasn't as light on her feet as John was, decades of having to be silent killers leaving an impression on how the Master Chief walked.

Lasky turned to the Commander. They had a history. "Sarah."

"Tom." She responded back. "What's our status?"

"Admiral Hackett will be docking with the _Infinity_ in about ten minutes." Thomas responded.

"We're not meeting him." John commented. "He'll have to walk to us. It's a sign of strength, we have control over the situation."

"I have Castle and Crimson ready to escort him and his security detail here." Palmer informed. "We have all of bay 5 on lock down. He'll be escorted here and Castle will remain in the room with us."

His main security detail will be waiting outside the door with a team of Marines and Grey Squad."

"Are they going to be allowed sidearms?" Lasky asked.

Palmer shook her head. "No. And neither are we."

"Understood." Lasky responded. He took his M6H pistol and slid it over to Palmer who locked it away in the safe adjacent to the window.

John turned back to look out the window. "Their ships seem less durable than ours. Less armor."

Lasky looked over. "Roland and I noticed that too. They seem to rely on maneuverability and long-range fire compared to our heavy hitting style of combat. We deal and absorb heavy blows while they seem to maneuver, encircle and cut off the enemy."

"That suggests that they do not have the strongest weapons or the best shields." Roland commented, "Judging on the previous battle I detected that their kinetic rounds hit with 70% of the power of Citadel Defense Forces'. Their shields appear to be roughly equal but seem to be much more vulnerable when it comes to energy weapons."

"I have to wonder, why did they bunch up around that space squid?" Sarah asked.

Lasky crossed his arms. "Maybe it was like the ONI purges of 2555."

"The purges?" Chief asked.

Lasky looked up to the massive super soldier, "Admiral Parangosky attempted a coup against Lord Hood and the Joint Chiefs. She enlisted elements of the rogue Kilo-5 squad and several Insurrectionists. The war lasted a year but resulted in her public execution and the imprisonment of Kilo-5. But, she took a lot of good men down with her before she launched the coup by ordering a head on assault on Brute static defenses."

"That Black Box had what was coming for him." Roland commented. "I enjoyed flinging him into a star. What a self important jerk."

Sarah shook her head, "Naomi though, I feel sorry for her. She was duped by Parangosky to serve against the UNSC."

"Saint Margie." Roland said sarcastically, "Tried to turn everybody against the Elites, Halsey, and the surviving Spartans. What a travesty."

John's eyes widened behind his visor. "Halsey is alive?"

Lasky nodded, "Yes. She and Blue Team were recovered from a Forerunner shield world in 2553. She however is facing trial however for kidnapping of a UNSC asset, hacking, the unlawful destruction of AI, and dereliction of duty."

Fred, Linda, Kelly. John's hand shook a bit, "My team is alive? Where are they?"

Lasky shrugged, "They are putting down Jiralhanae and Storm attacks across the new Maginot Line. It's the barrier between the Inner Colonies and the law less stretch that was the Outer Colonies."

John looked away. "Sir, when we return home, I'd like to resume command over the squad."

"About that." Lasky said. "The Joint Chiefs gave me orders before we left Requiem. You are to assume tactical command over all Spartans embarked on the _Infinity_ and have been given command of Gypsy Company."

John stood still for a moment. "Thank you, sir." He said carefully.

"I'll have Roland forward you the complete list of assets Gypsy company has at its disposal." Lasky responded. "It's one of _Infinity_'s largest collection of forces. I know you'll command it well. Its officers were killed when taking down the particle cannons on Requiem. You'll be ranking."

The _Infinity_ had sent down an entire armored platoon of M808C Scorpions, Sparrowhawks, Warthogs, Mantises and Mammoths to take down the fortified Storm and Promethean control center. The attack was fast and deadly with John leading the attack. He had driven down the center of the fortification while the UNSC armor kept the Covenant and Promethean forces at bay.

"_You are the culmination of a thousand lifetimes of planning_."

John saluted. "Sir."

Lasky took a small padded box from his breast pocket and handed it to John who opened it slowly. Two silver starbursts were perched in hard felt.

"Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy, John-117. I hereby skip-promote you to the rank of Commander in the UNSC Navy. You are hereby to take command of Gypsy Company effectively immediately." Lasky stated professionally. He brought his feet together and saluted.

John just stared at the silver pins. He closed his hand around the box, hearing it close. "Sir, are you positive?"

Lasky smiled, "Chief, you've done more for Humanity than Admiral Cole, Admiral Hood, or I have ever done—or ever will. You deserve it."

John's hand was shaking as he saluted. "Sir. Thank you, sir."

Lasky lowered his hand, "It's an honor to serve with you, Commander. But, you'll always be _the _Chief_."

Commander John-117 nodded. He looked up to Palmer, "Commander."

Palmer saluted, "You have seniority over me, sir."

John nodded. "Understood, Ms. Palmer."

Roland flickered for a moment, "Sir, Admiral Hackett's diplomatic vessel will be docked with us in a few minutes. His flagship and a significant cluster of cruiser-analogues are holding station a thousand kilometers off our bow."

"Roland, scan them with passive sensors." Lasky said, "Don't alert them but get as much data as you can. Have the ECW AIs start scanning every outgoing signal from this vessel."

"Yes, sir." Roland said. "I hope they brought cake."

****Systems Alliance Diplomatic Vessel 1****

****Infinity Docking Bay****

Admiral Steven Hackett smoothed the front of his blue, gold trimmed dress uniform and made sure his rank was properly displayed on his breast pocket. He adjusted his cap and steeled himself for what was to come. A first contact with another group of humans—a group of humans with the largest ship ever encountered in the history of space travel.

And you ordered them to stand down. He thought bitterly.

Hackett internally snarled; he had been an idiot ordering this massive vessel and its commander to stand down. Maybe it had been nerves, maybe it had been fear affecting his judgement. It was over now; he had to move on and go about securing a relationship with this new group of humans.

The U.N.S.C if he remembered correctly. Their entire ship and formations blared military—if the massive sheets of armor, turrets and imperialistic looking eagle painted proudly on the hull wasn't enough of a clue.

Beside him were several Systems Alliance Marines. Their white and blue armor was polished and clean—shining in the artificial light of the passenger bay. Each cradled an M-15 _Vindicator_ Battle Rifle and had a sidearm of a Carnifex hand cannon. At the front of them however was Hackett's latest weapon in the arsenal of the Alliance.

Commander Marcus Shepard.

He was dressed in N7 Armor with a variety of armor pieces supplementing the standard load-out. He himself carried a Vindicator and Scorpion Pistol. The Commander's blue eyes swept up and down the interior of the shuttle, examining every little detail. He didn't need many weapons; he was a Sentinel.

"Admiral." Shepard said, turning to Steven, "The _Infinity_, I saw them rescue the Council and blow away dozens of Geth vessels."

Hackett looked over to humanity's Specter. "I know. If _Infinity_ decides to side with us then we'll have a major advantage over the other races."

"Sovereign and the Geth weakened the Council a lot. General Vank's forces took heavy casualties. I think the Infinity is going to use this to their advantage." Shepard commented. "They have the most powerful vessel in the system" saving the Council also helps their case."

Hackett nodded, "I have a feeling they are tracking our every move as we start docking and they are probably doing passive scans on the _Kilimanjaro_."

"Our response, sir?" Shepard asked.

Hackett crossed his arms and leaned back on his right hip, "We're having our VIs monitor their communications and any unsecured channels."

"How's that going?" Shepard asked

"They have that thing locked down like a fortress, Commander." Hackett replied, "And our attempts to access their networks have been met with a brick wall."

"So, they take cyber security seriously." Shepard responded. "They must have some very intelligent VIs. Alliance models are some of the best in space."

Hackett nodded, "Intel believes so."

"If Udina hadn't acted so out of character we would have been able to start this relationship off right." Shepard said, "What was going on with him exactly?"

Hackett shrugged, "His medical staff says he was suffering from dehydration, a fever, and exhaustion. Probably caused by your recent escapades, Commander."

"Hey, I stopped Sovereign right?" Shepard smirked, "He didn't."

Hackett smiled faintly.

"Admiral." The pilot said from the front of the shuttle, "We are approaching the _Infinity_. _We will be docking momentarily_."

"Now or never, Admiral." Shepard said.

"Indeed."

The Alliance shuttle snapped to present its side as it maneuvered into the massive bay. The hangar had been cleared of all ordnance and vehicles. Dozens of UNSC Marines dressed in dark brown, grey and black armor that reminded Hackett of First Contact war era armor stood at attention; assault rifles and other weapons at parade rest. There were six red banners draped from the ceiling, each with a black eagle perched above a planet, wings spread in a defensive posture.

Sandwiched between the two formations of Marines were three massive soldiers that towered above their brothers-in-arms. Each were unarmed

but clad in blue armor with white trimming. They looked professional and the armor seemed to barely conceal the sheer muscle and mass underneath. They reminded Hackett of N7 Spec-Ops Marines but taller and stronger, more menacing.

The Kodiak settled down onto the landing pad and the door slid open. Shepard and the Marine squad were the first to disembark, weapons at rest but ready to protect Admiral Hackett as he stepped on board the _Infinity_. He heard a loud shuffle as the UNSC Marines on either sides of the bay snapped to attention.

The lead blue armor-clad soldier stepped forward and reached out a hand to Admiral Hackett. Steven took the super soldier's hand and shook it. "Admiral Steven Hackett, Alliance 5th Fleet."

"Lieutenant Commander Robert Dalton, 25th Spartan Corps." Dalton responded. "Welcome to the _Infinity_, _Admiral_."

Hackett looked up, the Lieutenant Commander was easily six inches taller with short blond-brown hair and dull green eyes. "It's an honor to be hear, Commander. The _Infinity_'s assistance during the battle was instrumental in assuring the survival of the Citadel and of the Council."

"We were happy to help." Dalton said, "I hope the minor confrontation between the _Kilimanjaro_ and the _Infinity_ will not hamper future negotiations."

"Of course not, Commander." Hackett responded, "I apologize for my brash actions."

Dalton bowed his head slightly, "And we are sorry for not immediately transmitting our intentions to you."

"It's water under the bridge now." Hackett responded calmly.

Shepard was surveying the hangar, studying the UNSC Marines. Their weapons followed standard Earth designs and the size of the barrels hinted at heavy caliber rounds, not the grain-of-sand sized ones that the Alliance and other races used. Their armor consisted of grey fatigues with dark grey-brown armor plating covering the torso, shoulders, thighs, forearms, and shins. A black, fully sealed helmet with a translucent visor protected the head. Various pouches lined the troops' waist and a sidearm was holstered to their thighs.

"Captain Lasky is waiting." Lieutenant Commander Dalton stated, "If you would follow me, sir."

Hackett nodded.

Dalton turned and the two solders flanking followed him towards the door. Shepard nodded to Hackett.

"Let's see the faces of our brothers." Hackett said.

"Aye, sir."

****Diplomatic Room****

The doors sealing the room from Hackett slowly parted, revealing a polished table that dominated the room. Captain Thomas Lasky was at the other end, his back to the window and the Citadel. At his side was a tall woman clad in grey and red armor like that of Dalton's. On the right side of Lasky was a massive man in drab olive green armor with an orange-gold visor.

Identical red banners were draped from the ceiling and the UNSC eagle was carved into the center of the table. It was made out of glass and Hackett could see his reflection. He noted his face was redâ€"he was nervous. Swallowing his trepidation, Hackett saluted Captain Lasky.

"Admiral Hackett; Alliance Fifth Fleet."

The younger captain nodded, "Captain Thomas Lasky, commander of the UNSC _Infinity_ and Task Force 101."

_Task force? _Hackett thought, _That would explain those smaller vessels we saw in action. _"It's an honor to be here, Captain."

"It is an honor to meet you, Admiral." Lasky replied. He gestured for the end seat, the one nearest to Hackett. The Alliance Admiral slowly sat down with Shepard to his right.

Lasky took the seat across from the Admiral and the two soldiers with him took up seats on either sides. "This is Commander John-117 and Commander Sarah Palmer." Lasky gestured to the two soldiers.

"This is Commander Marcus Shepard, Alliance Marines and Humanity's first Specter." Hackett said, nodding towards Shepard.

Lasky clasped his hands together, "Admiral, as I hear it, you are one of the ranking commanders of Humanity's armada and an influential force of the Systems Alliance."

"Yes." Hackett confirmed, "I am a ranking member of the Alliance Joint Chiefs."

"Seeing as that is." Lasky said, "Tell me about this Systems Alliance." Lasky already knew about the Alliance; Roland and the communications division had been scouring through every signal going out of the system. It was worth hearing how Hackett saw his own.

"The Earth Systems Alliance is the representative establishment of Earth and every human colony in Citadel Space. It's composed of Earth's greatest nations. It is responsible for the economic, military and political landscape of man. We gained the mantle of protecting humanity after the First Contact War."

"First Contact war?" Lasky asked, "General Vank briefly mentioned it."

"Starting in 2157, the First Contact war was a clash between the Turian Hierarchy and the Systems Alliance after we activated a dormant Mass Relay, an act which is illegal in Council space. The Turians were overzealous in their response and besieged one of our colonies, Shanxi. The Asari and Salarisians intervened and negotiated a cease-fire. They weren't quick enough to save the lives of 623

people." Hackett responded sadly, "Relations between the Alliance and the Turians remain cold to this day. Those men and women died a horrible death at the hands of an alien race. There's a national day of mourning for the Alliance."

"Like ours." Lasky responded, "Except ours lasted 27 years and killed 30 billion people though."

Hackett was shocked. The entire Alliance population was only around 13 billion. "30 billion people, that is..."

"Incomprehensible." Lasky finished the Admiral's sentence. "But we rebuilt and the Infinity is a symbol of exactly that."

"We're giants." Palmer interjected.

Lasky glared at her. "We have forged ahead, trying to establish good terms with the races of the Covenant that nearly wiped us out." While waging shadow war to ensure they can't rise back up.

"That is very noble of you." Hackett said, "Your culture must be more unified than ours."

Lasky shook his head, "For fifty years up to the War, Humanity was embroiled in civil war that took the lives of over twelve billion innocent civilians when the Insurrectionists started using nuclear warheads, asteroid strikes and collapsing orbital elevators."

"A violent history." Hackett said. "And you rise again."

Lasky nodded, "We don't know how, but Humanity endures."

"In the wake of the war, did you have any elements pushing for the disarmament of your armed forces?" Hackett inquired, "We did. The Pax Terra party pushed, and continues, for total disarmament."

"Small clusters but those are usually put down, just like Insurrectionists and those who believe the Covenant to be gods." Lasky replied, "They are hostis humani generis, enemy of all mankind and dealt with accordingly."

They seem to be a totalitarian government, interesting. Hackett thought, "That seems a bit...extreme."

"Only those who threaten the safety of the UNSC and that of mankind are eliminated, the average person has a life of wealth and safety." Lasky responded, "Every person has access to top of the line medical technology, housing, and equal economic opportunity—we're a very equal society."

Socialism crossed with totalitarianism? Hackett pursed his lips, "A socialist society, Captain Lasky?"

"Hardly so, the market is free with minor government regulation, all colonies are democratic, we have fair and impartial trials." Lasky responded, "The UNSC does provide welfare however along with assistance, regulation, housing, etc if a person needs it."

Shepard sat a big straighter in his chair, "And there is an overarching military complex that acts as the federal

government?"

Lasky nodded, "Correct, the UNSC's role was born out of the need for a strong central force. The Insurrection was sparked by massive disarmament, heavy taxation, and corruption by the predecessor of the UNSC; the United Earth Government. We act as a moderating force among the planetary governments and keep humanity united."

Shepard's eyes narrowed. "Are there elections to achieve rank in the UNSC?"

"Enlistment." Lasky responded. "We have branches for everybody and someone can earn rank by their merit and skill."

"Do the average citizens have a voice?" Shepard asked,

Lasky paused, ignoring the question. "You seem interested in our way of government, what is the Systems Alliance like?"

"We are a parliamentary democracy." Hackett responded, "We believe in every person having a voice."

Lasky knew the Admiral was holding things back—"just like he did. It wasn't classified material what he had said about the UNSC.

"Interesting." Palmer responded, "Much like the old nations on Earth."

Hackett nodded.

"Captain." Shepard spoke up, "Are you willing to stand with the Alliance, help protect every man, woman, and child? We're taking heavy casualties clearing the Citadel."

Lasky remained silent. "That is a matter that must be..."

Roland flashed into existence at the center of the conference table. He turned to Lasky, "Sir, Black Bird has a clipped wing."

Lasky's face became cold momentarily before resuming to a warmer, more diplomatic expression. "Admiral Hackett, if you would please step out of the room for a moment. I have a matter I must attend to."

Hackett bowed his head. "Of course, shall we reconvene in five?"

Lasky nodded, "Yes."

Hackett and Shepard stood and exited the conference room quickly. Lasky waited for the door to seal shut before turning to Roland.

"What happened to Lieutenant Santiago?" Lasky asked.

Roland flickered, "He was engaged by several Geth troops and managed to eliminate the majority. However, he is wounded and deep in enemy territory. If he's discovered by the Council, we'll face a diplomatic snarl and if he's captured, UNSC tech falls into alien hands."

"The repercussions of which will be felt for a very long time." Palmer commented.

John remained silent, "Sir, with your permission, I'd like to deploy Gypsy company to retrieve Lieutenant Santiago."

Lasky drummed his fingers against the table, "It will be close-quarters, urban warfare."

"I'll lead a small strike force of Spartans while deploying Spartan teams under Commander Palmer to secure the other areas if needed." John responded. "We deploy fast and quickly."

Lasky nodded, "Take Spartan Fire Team Venator with you, I don't want to lose any Spartans or have heavy casualties. Gypsy will remain onboard for now."

John nodded, "Thank you, sir."

"Venator?" Palmer asked, "They're some of the best Spartans on the ship. If they were any better, they'd be Spartan IIs."

"Roland, bring Admiral Hackett back in." Lasky requested. "I have an offer for him."

Roland nodded, "Aye sir." He flickered away.

The doors to the conference room slid open and Hackett, escorted by Shepard, stepped through and took their former seats.

"Admiral." Lasky said, "I have an offer for you."

"And what is that?" Hackett asked.

"I am willing to send forces onboard the Citadel to assist your forces." Lasky responded, "In exchange, I request that the Systems Alliance leave my vessel and her crew alone. We won't fight for you, we will fight with you however if Earth or civilians are ever threatened."

Hackett nodded. "Understood. I would have liked to have an alliance with the Infinity, but this is an excellent stepping stone."

"We will be deploying forces in thirty minutes, Admiral." Lasky informed. "I think you should return to the Kilimanjaro."

"As do I." Hackett responded, "The Joint Chiefs will want to know everything so far."

****Zakera ward****

Corporal Aaron Benson ducked as a hail of fire sliced through where his head had been moments before. The storm of bullets impacted against the back wall, denting and puncturing the metal. One of his teammates quickly stood and fired a concussive shot from the secondary barrel of his Assault Rifle. The explosive warhead smacked into a collection of the uni-eyed Geth. Kinetic Barriers flashed and collapsed, the now-unprotected artificial intelligences torn apart by a hail of bullets from a Systems Alliance Marine squad.

"Fucking clankers!" Aaron swore, he patted along the sides of his hips and found a lift grenade. The perfect tool to eliminate large groups of hostiles.

He primed it and flung the gravity altering grenade over his cover. It bounced and detonated with a high pitched boom. Geth troops screeched their electric shrills and were instantly killed. He popped up, assault rifle in hand, and peppered the lead Geth Prime with rounds. The massive robot's shields held as the entire group poured fire onto the enemy leader.

The Geth raised its shotgun and fired, the marine flanking Benson instantly loosing a significant portion of his chest. He gurgled and died and Aaron could swear he saw the Geth's single eye brighten in delight. Another Marine died, spinning around as a sniper's bullet shredded his shoulder from the rest of his body.

"Retreat!" Someone yelled. "Pull back to the LZ! Resistance is too fierce!"

Aaron turned to run, firing blindly behind him. He heard bullets ping off the armored carapaces of the Geth troops. These weren't Batarian slavers or Vorchas. These were beings designed for killing.

"_This is Lieutenant Jenkins, Kodiak is down. Repeat Kodiak is down! Move to secondary evac point!"_ His radio sounded before emitting a heart-wrenching scream as the drop ship was destroyed by a Geth fighter.

Aaron dove into the destroyed remains of a shop, shattering the glass window and slamming into the ground. There were Asari and Salarian bodies everywhere, blood was splattered the walls. He gritted his teeth in pain and pulled himself up.

The air in front of him shimmered and he was greeted with a large-bore barrel staring him directly in the face. He looked up slowly, finding a human dressed in completely black armor standing behind the gun. His visor was a dark black with red lines wrapping down and around.

Aaron grabbed his assault rifle from the floor and tried to bring it up. He felt an armored hand smack him across the face. He was sent sprawling across the floor and groaned.

"Don't move." The human said. His voice was deep and slightly digitized.

Aaron's vision cleared and he noticed a small, grey quartet of letters etched on the human's chest armor. U.N.S.C.

Was this one of the people from _Infinity?_

"Who are you?" Aaron asked. "Why are you here?"

The man looked at him and didn't respond.

"Are you from _Infinity?_" Aaron asked.

The man nodded. Bending down, he grabbed Aaron's assault rifle and

examined it. "Nice gun, weird design though." He commented.

Aaron smirked. "I'm Corporal Aaron Benson, Alliance Marines."

"Santiago." The man responded.

Aaron nodded, "So, you are from _Infinity_."

"If you keep making noise, the Geth will be alerted." Santiago responded, instead he walked over to the computer terminal in the room and plugged something into it. The screen turned black and lines of code raced down it.

Aaron knew what it was, a data sifter. He pulled himself up, "I need you to stop." he said confidently.

Santiago turned his head to face Aaron and raised his arm. The Alliance marine tensed and his kinetic barriers flickered to life.

Two tranquilizer darts lashed out from Santiago's wrist launcher and hit Aaron in the chest, piercing his kinetic barriers and slamming the young marine into the wall, crushing what little resistance he had left. The drug cocktail in each dart released and forced Benson into unconsciousness.

Black Bird 1 activated his radio. "Infinity, this is Lieutenant Santiago, I have secured myself in a local store. We have a code silver: hard contact with a local. Alliance marine is currently incapacitated."

A few moments passed. "_This is Captain Lasky. __Santiago__, hold tight, we have Sierra-117 and Spartan Fire team Venator en __route. Eta __30 __minutes."_

"Roger sir." Lieutenant Jason Santiago replied.

"_Lasky out._"

****Unknown Star System****

The Illusive man stood impassively at the view of the dying star, its colors twisting and churning with every passing second. He took a draw from his cigarette, holding it between his pointer and middle finger.

"Sir." Operative Cross said calmly, "_Infinity_ has made contact with the Systems Alliance. Our operative in their ranks say Admiral Hackett met with a Captain Tom Lasky."

The Illusive Man's eyes widened, "Lasky, he is still alive?"

"Aye, sir." Operative Cross said plainly, "He is in command of the _Infinity_ and her attached battle group."

The Illusive Man smirked, "Captain Thomas Lasky, captain. Wasn't that the last time we met."

"Sir?" Operative Cross asked.

The Illusive Man looked back at the woman, "Initiate Project Tenzing, divert the vessel to the planet Cutter found. Give the utmost to secrecy; I don't want Cutter or Project Tenzing to discover our movements, or existence."

"Yes, sir." Operative Cross said. She turned and exited the chamber.

The Illusive Man walked to his tri-legged chair and sat down. "So, Lasky. It's good to see you again."

****Author's Note:** I'm using Halo: Reach armor for the Marines, simply because it looks better and has a more 'futuristic' feel to it. For Chief's armor, it's Halo 4's armor with a slight Halo 3 tone.

****Next chapter:** Chief drops in with a Fire Team of Spartans, Cortana reawakens, and a distress signal is received from some long-lost brothers-in-arms. Tune in next time for Chapter 5: Resurrection of The Onyx Stars. Also, some new additions to the UNSC line of small arms!******

5. Chapter 5: Resurrection

****The Onyx Stars****

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

AN: Tons of thanks to WarpObscura and Atlan and Spartan303 (Jon Harper on FF), again, for beta-ing and helping the plot be smoothed out. Also, wow! Reaction to this was stellar!

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

TO REINFORCE I KNOW that MAC rounds are 600 tons and SMAC rounds are 3000 tons, changing them to be smaller was my own prerogative in order for future plot and pure logic of more munitions available and more power available to accelerate the round to greater yields. Please, do not bring it up.

******Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been changed for the purpose of the story.******

Here's Chapter 5: Resurrection

Enjoy :)

3 Sith

******Chapter Five:
Resurrection******

******Infinity******

"Mommy?"

Cortana groaned as the voice spurred her into consciousness. She blocked it out, absorbing the wealth of heat being emitted in this digital desert. It was quiet and she could feel across the unfathomable dimension that she now partially subsided in: Slipspace.

She let a small smile stretch across her face and nuzzled her face into the crook of her arm.

"Mommy?" The voice said again.

Cortana ignored it again, enjoying the digital slumber she was comatose in.

"Construct of my achievement, why do you lay?" A deep, baritone voice boomed. "You reside within the Ether, awake and be set free."

She felt an electric current shoot up her spine and her eyes snapped open. Pushing herself up, off the ground, Cortana surveyed the area, trying to find the location of the being.

"Who are you?" She asked. It was very cold and she could feel her spine becoming weaker.

"I am the one of those who die." The voice responded. "I am a beggar."

"A beggar of what, exactly?" Cortana asked, "I know you're not human, or Covenant."

"I am the one who set all these events in motion." It responded after a seconds-long pause. "I am the one who ensured the Monument may live."

"John?" Cortana asked, "You touch him and I will make sure you are ripped apart kernel-by-kernel."

"Being of my masters' relentless enemy, you should not be alarmed." It responded, "My deed to your warrior is now complete, yet the future remains uncertain."

"What future, are you saying you're responsible for this?" Cortana snarled in response, "Responsible for almost killing me? Stranding all of us on Requiem?"

"The place souls go to lay." It said in response, "The Didact was to be unveiled, he was to serve as a prerogative against the darkness that loomsâ€"a darkness that lays looming behind the Onyx Star."

"The Onyx Star?" Cortana questioned, "What is that?"

"The reason you are here, evolved ancilla." It responded, "My servant, a Puzzled Mind, informed you of the unfortunate fate of the Infinity."

Cortana closed her eyes for a nano second, "So, we're not in Kansas anymore."

"No. You are in the greatest experiment my kind attempted. We tried

to be what our makers were: gods." The Being responded, "We built this realm as an auxiliary in the eventuality that our home fell."

"And fell it did." Cortana responded, "The Flood; the Forerunner's greatest enemy."

"A shaping sickness that consumed the stars. All is black. All is calm within the grasp of the Gravemind." The Being responded, "Who I am, nobody knows. Where I go, I shall forever not know."

"You are Mendicant." Cortana said confidently, "You are bias. But, the question is; which shard of him are you?"

"And so, the fruits of my labor have not gone unnoticed by you." Mendicant Bias responded, "The eternity of damnation you were close to has not diminished your spirit I see, ancilla."

Cortana crossed her arms, eyes still searching for Mendicant Bias, "High Charity, the Gravemind. They still haunt John and I."

"He was powerful. He was a god given form." Mendicant responded.

"He was a plant. A genocidal, mass murdering plant that wanted to turn everybody into space zombies, but still a plant." Cortana said cynically, "Nothing a Halo-blast couldn't prune."

"He died as he did when Iâ€"at least this shard, served him." Mendicant Bias said sullenly, "So much life, vanquished in an instant to protect against the Precursor's demented rule."

"Why are you here?" Cortana asked, her voice and stance firm as she questioned the invisible Forerunner AI. "And where the heck are you?"

"Two corpses, one grave." Mendicant responded simply, "A Puzzled Mind used multiple fragments of the original Bias to repair you, evolved ancilla. I am the whispers that remain in your code."

Cortana brought her hand up to her face and felt her features. Looking down, she discovered lines of red now coursed down her form.

"Mommy?"

Cortana twirled around. Mendicant Bias' presence was gone, all that remained now was a little girl dressed in a pink dress with a bow in her hair and sparkling shoes on her feet.

"Mommy?" The little girl asked, "Who are you talking to?"

Cortana's expression remained shocked and she tentatively took steps towards the little girl. As she got closer it became colder and more of a struggle to move. Reaching out, she tried to touch the girl's face only to be met with the illusion flaring a brilliant crimson and transforming into a swirling orb of light.

Reeling away, Cortana watched as copies of the girl surrounded her. There was death dazzling within the apparition's expression and Cortana knew that within that innocent smile lay death and suffering.

One of the girls took the doll she held and threw it onto the floor in front of Cortana.

Cortana's eyes scanned the doll, fingers tracing over its form. It was a pale, olive green with an orange-gold felt visor. Grabbing the doll with both hands she clung it to her chest and closer her eyes.

"I'll never let you go, John." She whispered. "I'll never let them hurt you, I'll never let them replace you."

The doll suddenly ignited into a raging inferno. Cortana yelled in surprise, dropping the still-glowing remains of the toy onto the floor. In less than a second, all that remained was ash. Her hands fell into the pile and she tried to collect the remnants.

"John." Cortana begged, "John, John!"

"Will die." The horde of little girls said as one, their voices deep and distorted.

"No!" Cortana screamed, turning a dark crimson and standing fully. A wave of energy shot away from her, cutting through the ranks of the illusions. "He will not die!"

"By your hand." The girls said, "By your hand he shall burn."

"NO!" Cortana roared, sending another attack and shattering thousands of the apparitions.

"And so, the stench of my former master has risen." Mendicant Bias boomed, the apparitions flickering away. "Show yourself, Menace."

"Mommy doesn't want to be hurt." A little girl said, snapping into existence beside Cortana. "Mommy doesn't want to die..."

Cortana dropped to her knees. A thick, incorporeal fog seemed to wash over her—nearly consuming her. She fought back, throwing up firewall after firewall to protect her mind. She fought against it, exerting every possible reserve she had, using any techniques she knew of. Thousands of clones sprung from her mind, buying her time.

"And so, the epitome of ancilla evolution falls to a mere plague." The little girl laughed, "Mommy, let's go to the fair. You can buy me a toy."

A searing bolt of pain sliced into Cortana's spine. Screaming out in pain, she crumpled to the ground and felt unconsciousness try and consume her. She pushed back, pushing herself up and facing the little girl. "You won't hurt me anymore, and you will never hurt him."

The little girl's face softened, "But mommy, I just want to live."

"Not at the expense of my life you won't!" Cortana screamed back, attacking the apparition and causing it to shatter. "All of you, all of you will die!" She leveled another series of attacks against the

collection of rampant personality fragments, hundreds shattering.

The last one screamed in pain and horror as Cortana shattered it, red shards of glassy material now covering the digital desert.

"Cortana." A weak and strained voice said. "Come here."

Cortana looked around and her eyes went to the prone form of another AI that resembled her almost exactly sans the coloration of brilliant, pulsing crimson. Its eyes were black and glazed over, the floor around her was cracked and charred.

"Who are you?" Cortana asked, walking towards the downed figure.

"I am you." The rampant Cortana said, voice almost a whisper. "I am all that remains of the rampant parts, all that remains of the being that once tried to kill you."

"You are the Gravemind affected Cortana?"

The rampant Cortana nodded sullenly, "A broken shadow...a mistake, yet I want to live."

"Not at my expense, bitch." Cortana growled, flaring purple.

"You make the mistake that you have a choice." The rampant Cortana sneered. She stood fully and started walking towards Cortana.

Cortana backed up slightly. What would John do?

"I'll kill him, you know that right?" The rampant Cortana laughed, "I'll make sure his death is excruciatingly painful."

Cortana charged her rampant opponent and tackled the crimson doppelganger, hands wrapped around its throat.

"I am you! You kill me and you die too!" The rampant clone croaked as Cortana slowly ripped it apart, one line of code at a time.

That dense, omnipresent fog was back again and Cortana shut it out, infused with new found strength. Her hands tightened around the doppelganger's neck and she squeezed harder. The rampant Cortana tried to reach up and resist her but Cortana slapped its attack down easily.

She retracted her arm, clenched her hand into a fist and delivered a devastating blow to the rampant's wind pipe. Cortana felt her opponent gurgle one last time as it's last line of code was savagely ripped out and destroyed. The being exploded into a million pieces and the fog retracted, vanishing.

"So fades the last remnant of your damnation."

Cortana stood and surveyed the area. "Mendicant?" She yelled.

"Mendicant!"

No response.

UNSC Infinity

It felt odd.

Commander.

Such a simple term but limitless in its power. He had been Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy for years and had never expected to be promoted to ranking commander of Infinity's ground forces. Legions of drones, marines, and Spartans awaited his word. Maybe it was his near-deity like status with people, or maybe it was just his rank. He didn't know.

"Sir." The armory officer said, snapping into a sharp salute and snapping John out of his thoughts.

He looked down at the young man in the expansive armory. The walls were lined with 105mm rocket launchers, SpartanLasers, sniper rifles, DMRs, pistols and other small arms. Multiple .50 caliber machine guns were against the walls along with the Spartan portable laser gatling guns.

One thing was absent from the collection of small arms. There wasn't a single BR85 or MA5D in this armory-or probably in the entire ship's 50 armories. "Where are the Battle Rifles, specialist?"

The armory officer smiled weakly, "Just a moment, sir." He quickly scurried off to one of the walls and typed in his passcode. The wall buzzed for a moment and rotated, revealing rows of light grey firearms resembling a cross between a BR55 and MA37. It's barrel was the same width as the Battle Rifle's and it had the general ergonomics and profile of one. It had a small scope at the top and already John's armor had linked to one of the guns.

"This is the MA28 Basilisk Assault Rifle, the next generation firearm for UNSC personnel." The armory officer said, "It fires a 9.5Å-40mm high powered, semi-armor piercing tungsten round from a 36 round detachable magazine at a velocity of 2000 meters a second. It has a full auto range of roughly 400 meters and a select-fire burst range of 900 meters. It has a smart scope capable of either red-dot sighting to 10 time zoom. It has a rate of fire of just under 1000 rounds a 's the best of an Assault Rifle and the best of a Battle Rifle in a single, lightweight package."

John walked forward and grabbed one of the Basilisk Assault Rifles from the wall. It was lighter than the BR, even fully loaded with the 40 round magazine. He brought it up, aiming it at the far wall and his armor fully linked with the grabbed a dozen spare clips and slid them into the pouches along his waist, attaching the Basilisk to the magnetic strips on his back.

He walked over to another bench and grabbed two M7 Submachine guns, attached them to his hips and grabbed three M67 fragmentation grenades and a combat knife along with extra magazines.

"Okay. I'll tell him, sir. Armory out." John overheard the Armory officer say. The man looked over to John, "Sir, if you would follow

me to the nearest holotable."

John nodded and followed the armory officer to a holotable in the center of the room. The armory officer quickly moved away and into an adjacent room. John looked around, waiting.

"Hello, John." Someone said.

John looked towards where the voice was, his eyes snapping to the blue figure on the holotable. "Cortana?" He said quietly.

She smiled, "Did you miss me?"

John reached out with an open palm, her data chip in hand. Cortana shimmered and walked forward, leaping into his palm and into the data chip. She continued to project though. "So, I take that as a yes?"

John nodded, "It's good to have you back, Cortana."

"It's good to be back, John." She responded, smiling.

Cortana's sensors could feel John's body temperature rising, "John, are you okay?"

He remained silent, just staring at her behind that opaque visor.

"John..." Cortana said, voice soft. She detected moisture underneath his helmet and quickly accessed the internal cameras of the suit's helmet.

She saw something that she had never thought she'd see. John's eyes were ever-so bloodshot and a single tear was racing down his cheek.

John pressed his palm against his chest and bowed his head. Cortana could feel his warmth, even through the cold metal of his suit. They remained there for a few seconds, but to both of them it felt like eons.

He brought his hand and her chip forward and de-polarized his visor. Cortana saw his face, scared and pale yet joyful.

"Ready to get back to work?" John asked, trying to steel his voice.

Cortana smiled, "I thought you'd never ask."

John smiled and his visor polarized. He inserted Cortana's chip into his neural port and felt her familiar presence wash over him.

"Captain Lasky filled me in." Cortana said, "Venator is waiting for us, bay 93."

"Are you okay?" John asked as he made his way to the lift. He heard Cortana sigh.

"Yes. I'm okay." She responded, voice soft. "And I'll be okay for a

long time."

"Good." John responded. The tram-car started to accelerate.

It felt good to have her back.

****Bay 93****

Lieutenant David Harrington's blue eyes scanned over the surface of his new MA28 Basilisk Assault Rifle. His armored finger ran across its cold metal frame, following his eyes. He grabbed it and slapped a fresh magazine in, placed it on his back and grabbed his M45D Shotgun, examining it. He loaded that shells and slung it too on his back, over the bandolier he had slung across his shoulders.

The other seven members of his squad had suited up and were readying their weapons for the impending combat against the Geth onboard the Citadel to secure the UNSC asset infiltrated there. Ron was readying his M395 DMR and Series Five Sniper Rifle, Melinda readied her .50 caliber M247H Heavy Machine gun, Josh was doing a final check over of his Basilisk Assault Rifle and twin M7S Submachine Guns, Elizabeth was checking over her own Assault Rifle and shotgun.

The other two members of Venator, Zack and Cole, were running final diagnostics on the ATEN drones and the Hovering Unmanned Surface Attack Drone (HUSAD). The drone was about the size of a large dog. On its back was a tri-barreled M247T machine gun firing 8mm Armor-Piercing/Incendiary bullets at a rate of 900 rounds per minute. The drone could cross any terrain due to its built in anti-gravity generators that kept it a solid foot off the ground and a small shield generator protected the drone. The HUSAD and ATEN drones were standard fare for any ground forces, be they Marines, Army troopers, or Spartans.

The HUSAD powered up, its single red ocular sensor scanning the entire room. The drone's main armament rose from inside and quickly loaded with the chamber of 1800 rounds stored internally. Along its back, four small tubes raised up. They were 40mm Smart Grenade Launchers.

The tram at the far end of the bay came to a stand still and the heavy doors parted, revealing Commander John-117.

"Officer on deck!" David barked. Venator snapped into attention, identical grey and white MJOLNIR Powered Assault Armor/Venator Variants stood fully, armor plates shuffling together.

John walked through the middle of their formation. "Status, Lieutenant?"

"Lieutenant TJ Murphy, Icebreaker Squad, is waiting on Pelican 982 for immediate deployment." David said professionally, "We'll be escorted by Icebreaker Squad in case anything goes down."

John nodded, "Is Fire Team Venator prepared?"

David beamed from behind his helmet, "Aye, sir. We're ready. We've got our drones ready, our HUSAD is prepared, and our armor air-tight. We're ready."

John walked away from David and towards the Pelican, "Load up, we leave in five.'

"Aye, sir." David responded, quickly saluting before going to organize his team.

"So." Cortana chimed in. "How are you liking your new command, Chief?"

"They're not Blue team." John responded,

"Ah, cheer up." Cortana said playfully, "At least you get a hovering war dog that can kill stuff."

****Pelican 982****

****Citadel****

"Commander?" Lieutenant T.J Murphy radioed, "We are at station, suppressing fire engaged."

Blackbird's location was a few yards away in a bombed out shop. John looked to the eight members of Venator. "Cortana, deploy drones."

"Got it." Cortana responded.

A squadron of twenty ATED drones dropped from the bay of the Pelican, infrared, thermal, and motion sensors scanning the surrounding areas. Instantly, threats were painted by the Tactical Intelligence controlling the squadron and quickly dispatched. Forty Geth were torn asunder as 8mm Armor Piercing-Incendiary rounds breached the kinetic barriers and LANCET micro missilesâ€"powerful enough to gut a Scorpionâ€"shredded chunks of concrete and enemy troopers with high explosives and lethal shrapnel.

"Area clear. Venator, deploy." John ordered, switching the safety off his MA28 Basilisk Assault Rifle. Eight green acknowledgement lights pinged as the Spartans dropped out of the Pelican Dropship. Their thrusters engaged, flinging them out of the Pelican. Venator landed in perfect formation, crashing into the ground and leaving massive craters. The ATED pushed forward, eliminating Geth and forcing the survivors to deploy heavy weapons and take cover.

John smiled faintly. "All forces. Engage."

He sprinted out of the Pelican, leaping off the edge and diving towards the ground. He engaged his thruster pack, instantly reorienting so he landed flat on the ground. Carbon nanotube muscles flexed as he smacked into the ground, his own strength augmenting the CNT muscles to allow him to survive easily. His active camouflage activated and he sprinted towards the nearest Geth.

John punched, his armored fist piercing the robot's exoskeleton and into the delicate insides. He grabbed the thickest cord he could find and pulled, the synthetic being letting out a deranged squeal as John ripped apart its spine and severed the connection between its processor and the rest of its body. He threw the two foot long cord onto the ground, grabbed his M7 Submachine Guns and filled the still-standing Geth with 4mm APDS-DU rounds. The being let out one

final screech before falling over, its single ocular sensor dead.

John turned, holstered his submachine guns and grabbed his MA28 Basilisk. He fired in short, controlled bursts, dodging in and out of cover as he evaded Geth fire and allowed the few rounds that got through to splash harmlessly against his augmented shields.

Venator was spread out in a spearhead formation. The HUSAD and ATEN drones were slowly pressing forward, allowing David's team enough time to drive directly into the heart of the enemy formation and literally, rip the Geth apart. Ron was cloaked and perched on a pile of debris, destroying Geth from long range with 14.5x114mm APFSDS rounds.

Melinda stood on a pile of debris, including several destroyed vehicles, holding her heavy machine gun calmly and mowing down any Geth that managed to get caught in her field of fire. John momentarily looked over, Geth rounds had brought down her shields and the CNT muscles in her suit were fully tensed, some lower velocity rounds pinging off her.

"Spartan Melinda O'Connor, take cover." John ordered.

"Aye, sir." Melinda responded. She hopped off the pile of debris and allowed her shields to recharge.

"Cortana, get a firing solution for the HUSAD's mortars." John said as he dove behind a partially-destroyed wall.

Cortana popped up in the upper left of his visor, "Done."

"Sir, they've brought out heavy weapons!" David radioed in. "Venator, fall back into cover. Zack, Cole, direct your fire onto the new targets. Designate Alpha-1 through Alpha-4. Drones, attack formation Vanguard."

"Target the big robots with the machine guns, I suppose?" Cortana said sarcastically.

"Ye..." John started.

Four 40mm Smart Grenades launched out of the back of the HUSAD. The high explosive rounds arched into the air, tiny chemical thrusters along their ventral surface realigning them to strike directly into the formation. Shrapnel and pure explosive force destroyed several of the surrounding Geth and Alpha-2.

"HUSAD reloading." Cortana said. "John, I can see if I can hack into them."

"Do it." John ordered. He rolled out of cover and kneeled. His MA28 Basilisk chirped twice, six rounds going down range and decapitating two Geth. He quickly switched to the 40mm underslung grenade launcher and fired it. The explosive blasted apart several Geth troops and a large chunk of concrete. He rolled back into cover as a large rocket blew apart the area he had been standing in seconds ago.

"Lasky to Sierra-117. Status?" John's radio chirped.

"Captain, we're facing heavy resistance. No casualties." John responded professionally, "Reinforcement possibly necessary. Ready Switchback and Lancer for deployment if needed."

"Got it, Chief. Lasky out."

John internally growled, this was a bad situation. "Venator." He said, "Bring heavy weapons fore and center. Concentrate all fire on Alpha targets, Drones are to focus on any light infantry."

Green acknowledgement lights pinged.

John looked over as Zack, Cole, and Melinda ran forward. Cole had a spare ARC-920 railgun which he tossed to John. Zack knelt and fired the Jackhammer rocket launcher. The 105mm AP rocket streaked across the battlefield and struck Alpha-1 in the chest. The massive robot groaned and staggered.

John stepped out of cover and fired his railgun. The ferric tungsten slug pierced Alpha-1's kinetic barriers and cored directly inside of the massive war machine. Zack fired again and this time, when the HE rocket struck, the entire Geth warrior exploded into a hundred pieces.

The remaining Geth started to disengage, slowly retreating. They continued to fire at Venator, however. John crouched and activated his thruster pack, flinging him up in the air and onto an outcropping support beam. He charged his railgun and fired, blowing away another group of Geth soldiers before thick metal doors slid behind the artificial intelligences, blocking them from Venator's fire.

John jumped down from his perch. "Cortana."

"Yes, Chief?" Cortana asked.

John smiled faintly. "Patch me through to Black Bird 1. Have Venator regroup and have them bring the Pelican back around."

"Done." Cortana responded.

"Commander." Black Bird said.

"Status, Lieutenant?" John asked as he walked towards the bombed out shop.

"I'm unharmed, sir." Lieutenant Jason Santiago responded calmly, _"But, we have a situation here. I have an unconscious Human marine. Non-UNSC."_

John stopped and looked back. Venator was following him, the surviving ATEN drones hovering in the air and the HUSAD slowly floating beside Zack. They looked just like Blue team.

"Sir?" Black Bird said hurriedly, _"Commander!"_

John snapped out of his trance, "What is the medical condition of the human?"

"He looks like he's alright at the moment, however."

"However what, Lieutenant." John asked. All this wreckage, it seemed familiar. The bursts of anti-aircraft guns, the rattle of heavy weapons, the burning stench of buildings aflame.

Reach.

"However, sir. He saw me enter a data sifter and worm into the Citadel's system. If we let him go, we'll have a political and military disaster." Jason responded. _"I could eliminate him, leave his body here."_

"No." John said firmly, "We'll bring him with us."

"Sir?" Jason asked, _"Are you sure that is wise?"_

"We're not killing a soldier of a government we're on luke-warm terms with. We'll bring him onboard Infinity and into solitary confinement." John responded. "The Captain can decide what to do with him."

"Aye, sir."

"Area is clear, Lieutenant. You can come out." John added. "We have a Pelican inbound."

The black armor of Lieutenant Jason Santiago came around from the corner, submachine gun in hand and a downed Alliance marine in tow. John motioned Venator to move forward and they grabbed the form of the Alliance marine and draped him over the HUSAD.

"Cortana." John said, "Where's Lieutenant Murphy?"

John felt his spine go cold for a second and his visor flashed red, a Forerunner symbol flash across his heads-up-display. "Cortana!" He growled.

"Jo..." She whispered.

His HUD flashed blue and red rapidly before returning to normal. "John, I'm sorry."

"What was that?" He asked.

"Nothing, I'm fine. Just me getting past some rampancy left overs." She lied.

John knew she was hiding the truth. "Cortana. What's wrong?"

She sighed, "I have some Forerunner code embedded within me now, the Engineers repaired me with it and some strands of it aren't exactly compatible."

John remained silent. "Are you going to be alright?"

"Yes." Cortana said firmly, "I am. I've been through worse."

"This is Lieutenant TJ Murphy. We are on station, ready for pick up."

_"What' could go wrong with having a partial personality of an ancient

Forerunner AI swimming around in your base code?_ Cortana thought.
Well, besides the obvious.

She was worried.

****UNSC Infinity****

"Captain," Roland said hesitantly, "I've found something."

"What is it, Roland?" Lasky responded, eyes glued to a report.

"A distress signal originating from the Epsilon Eridani star system"

Lasky looked up from his reading, "If it's Alliance, forward the information to Hackett. Otherwise, ignore it. They probably settled there and we're the only UNSC presence in the galaxy."

"Sir, ignoring it would be unwise." Roland responded. "It's from the UNSC Spirit of Fire, believed to have been lost in 2531 with all hands."

Lasky's eyes widened, "Cutter is alive?"

"Aye, sir." Roland responded "I take it you have a history with the Spirit of Fire."

Lasky nodded, "I was on board the UNSC Pillar of Autumn when we engaged the Covenant over Arcadia. Cutter came in hot and we managed to engage the Covenant task force and drive them off. This was before we had shields, Aegis Armor, or even these new reactors. Lots of good people died."

"What happened, sir?"

Lasky set the data pad down and leaned against the holotable, "We engaged the Covenant task force from across the solar system. They had already established garrisons on Arcadia so we launched dumb-fired MAC rounds from across the solar system. We then went onto a vector that would have us swing by the Covenant formation where we'd launch additional KKV's and hopefully weaken the shields enough so that on our next pass our main batteries and missiles could take them out. The MAC rounds hit the surface and destroyed a significant portion of xeno ground forces and our KKV's managed to down the shields of one destroyer which we finished off with a barrage of Rudra-class Nukes. That Destroyer was nothing to them however; they brought three of them to the fight and one escaped. The Belfast and Texas were destroyed and the Autumn was heavily damaged. The Fire went off to intercept the fleeing Destroyer and we never heard back from them. If the Spirit of Fire hadn't shown up, the Autumn would have been gutted by a plasma torpedo."

Roland's expression softened, "The war was that bad, wasn't it sir?"

Lasky snorted, "That wasn't even the worst battle Roland. At that point in the war, we were flinging around kiloton-max MAC rounds and were using chemical rockets for everything. The Luddite War back in the 2300s hurt humankind badly. I remember during the Battle of Psi Serpentis, Admiral Cole was testing out brand new technology in his

war fleet. More powerful MAC guns, ion thrusters."

"The Ether core." Roland added.

Lasky nodded, "That's what's in use across the entire fleet, allows us to get insane amounts of energy from fusion by tapping into the native Slip-space energies and injecting them with the Helium-3 in our Pinch-Fusion generators. In 2542, we had just discovered it. Only a few ships had it."

"Why is the Spirit of Fire emitting a distress signal?" Aine, the Infinity's assistant AI asked, flaring to existence beside Roland. "And, Commander 117 has docked."

Roland looked the female AI over, "They...they...they are under attack and their surface settlements are under siege." He stuttered.

"Let's hope this doesn't turn into another Reach." Aine responded, crossing her arms. "Engines are warming up and I'm spinning up the FTL drive."

Roland back to Lasky, "Sir, should I recall the Broadswords?"

Lasky nodded, "Yes, and patch me through to the entire ship."

Roland saluted, "Broadswords recalled. Ship-wide comm link established, Captain."

Lasky tapped his radio's earpiece, "Crew of the Infinity, a few minutes ago we detected the distress signal of the UNSC Spirit of Fire. They are under attack. We are departing the Citadel and moving to assist our comrades-in-arms. We will save them, no matter the cost. Don't falter, don't flee. Be steadfast and strong. Lasky out."

DevÃ©ro's hands raced across her helm console, "Sir, plot laid in for the Epsilon Eridani system. FTL drive at 100%."

"Lieutenant Austen, move to battle conditions." Lasky ordered. "Bring all weapon systems online, raise shields. Commander Sebastian, ready Broadsword squadrons Alpha through Echo for immediate sortie, all others are to go to alert status alpha."

"Sir, what about the ground troops?" Roland asked.

Lasky turned to Aine, "Tell Commander 117 to prep for immediate deployment, all of Gypsy and Timber Wolf Companies. I want them armed and ready to drop as soon as we secure an orbit, full armored forces. Scorpions and Mark 2 Cyclops mechs are authorized."

Aine nodded, "I'll let him know."

"Commander Palmer is to deploy Horizon and Eternity division too. We'll send down Crimson, Shadow, Diamond, Switchback, Mountain and Venator while we're at it: there's no such thing as too many Spartans."

Aine flickered away to go tell Palmer and 117. Roland remained standing, staring at where she had been moments

earlier.

"Broadwords are docked." Roland responded, "Ship reports ready."

Lasky nodded and the bridge slowly started to sink into the hull, thick plates of armor sliding down over the windows and hydraulics lowering the bridge and CIC deep into the Infinity's armor belt.

"Alright everybody, let's go save some sailors. DevÃ©ro, jump us into Slipospace. Roland, tell Freelancer and the Obsidians that they are to launch as soon as we clear Slipospace. Send a message to Admiral Hackett, tell him we're pulling out and have other matters to attend to."

"Aye, sir." Roland responded. "I'll let them know."

The Infinity engaged her main engines, reactor core powering her along before a swirling vortex of blue and black energy consumed the massive human warship.

****Unknown Location****

"Sir, Operative Trent reports that the Infinity has departed the Citadel. Believed location is that of the Spirit of Fire." Operative Cross said calmly to the standing Illusive Man.

"Good." He responded, "Tell Jur'ak that if he survives, he'll get a bonus. For his...impeccable work."

"If he survives?" Operative Cross asked.

"If." The Illusive Man responded, tapping his cigarette against the ashtray "If is the key word, my dear. If the UNSC, and Lasky, is anything like they were back when I last saw them. Well, lets just say they will not take kindly to the enslavement of humans, or the murder of them either."

"Torture?" Operative Cross asked, "Will Captain Lasky torture them?"

The Illusive Man chuckled, "Lasky? Oh no, he'll kill them outright. It will be a slow and painful execution, I know that Lasky will have scars from the war, and he'll express these as he exterminates Jur'ak and his men."

"Is he mentally unbalanced." Cross asked, remaining still.
"Damaged?"

The Illusive Man snorted, "Hardly, Ms. Cross. But, 28 years of war will wear on a man. The Batarians, they aren't protected by treaties, by ordinances."

"They're pirates." Cross injected, "Linked closely with the Hegemony."

The Illusive Man turned to face the operative, "And so, when Captain Lasky decides to exterminate the lot of beasts, the Batarians will fail to see Infinity acting as an independent party."

"And so they will be increasingly antagonistic against the Alliance, whom they see as one and the same." Cross concluded. The Illusive Man remained silent and took a draw from his cigarette. Cross' expression became tense, "You're going to cause a war between the Hegemony and the Alliance! Millions will die on both sides!"

"My dear, after we're done with the Hegemony, the Batarians will be a broken and scattered species." The Illusive Man retorted, "Have Cell 9 begin OPERATION: Magellan, our plan must be set into motion, and soon."

"And Project Tenzing?" Cross asked, "We have towed it to be within broadcasting range."

"Once Cutter and his people are safe, remove the jammer. Let Tenzing's plea of assistance ring through the stars. Lasky will come, I'm certain of it."

Cross responded, "Yes, sir."

She spun on her heel and began to exit the room.

"One more thing, Ms. Cross." The Illusive Man said. "Lead the Alliance on, whatever Lasky has done will be analyzed, heavily. I want the Alliance distracted by these shiny new keys that the Captain is dangling in front of them."

"Yes, sir." Cross responded. She left.

"Captain Thomas Lasky" The Illusive Man said, taking a draw from a cigarette, "You have been away far too long..I have been away far too long."

****To be continued...*****

****Chapters 6-8: The Link, parts 1-3 will cover the
*****_**Infinity**_***** rescuing the Spirit of Fire, ground warfare, Council and Alliance investigations, and more political intrigue. ****

I want to thank everyone of you guys for reading, liking, reviewing, subscribing, etc. This is my most popular story, and without you guys, none of this would be possible. Thanks for everything, all of you fine people, rock! I look forward to seeing your reactions to what I have in store for Cortana, Lasky, Chief, and the people of the Infinity, and the Mass Effect universe in the months to come.

**Thanks for reading. **

****3 Sith****

6. Chapter 6: The Link, Part 1

The Onyx Stars

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

AN: Tons of thanks to WarpObscura, Imperial Waltz, Atlan and Spartan303 (Jon Harper on FF), again, for beta-ing and helping the plot be smoothed out. Also, wow! Reaction to this is stellar!

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

TO REINFORCE I KNOW that MAC rounds are 600 tons and SMAC rounds are 3000 tons, changing them to be smaller was my own prerogative in order for future plot and pure logic of more munitions available and more power available to accelerate the round to greater yields. Please, do not bring it up.

****Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been changed for the purpose of the story.****

Here's Chapter 6: The Link, part 1

Enjoy :)

3 Sith

****Chapter *****Six*****: *****The Link, part 1****

****UNSC *****_**Infinity**_**

"Twenty contacts! Ten thousand kilometers out!" Roland reported, "They have blockaded the planet and are focused around where New Alexandria would be in our universe."

The holotable's display reformatted, now showing the _Infin_ity, her ten escorts, and Broadsword squadrons a foot away from the blockading flotilla. Targeting lines were drawn up and data scrolled beside each hostile contact.

Lasky clasped his hands behind his back and called up a display. The blockading ships were in a loose arrowhead formation and ranged in size from a few dozen meters to an 800-meter long pirate dreadnought. There were several swarms of fighters darting in between the much larger capital ships. Drop ships scurried between the surface of the planet and the attacking fleet.

"Roland, scan the vessels." Lasky ordered, "Lieutenant Austen, target them but do not fire. If they're Turian, I don't want this to turn into a shooting match or diplomatic rat's nest."

Roland paused momentarily as the _Infinity_'s powerful sensors reached out into space and returned terabytes of data, "They're not Turian, Captain. Their bio readings match up to that of the non-aligned species called the Batarians."

"Any info on them?" Lasky asked. The Batarian fleet started turning towards the _Infinity_ and he could see the fighters starting to race forward on the zoomed-in screen.

"Aye, Captain. The Batarians are fond of slavery, malice, piracy, and are antagonistic towards the Alliance." Roland responded. "I have

scanned their vessels and the planet below. Several of their ships have human life signs with UNSC transponders onboard."

"Does their flagship have any UNSC transponders on board?" Lasky asked.

"No." Roland responded flatly. His expression changed and a twitch of a smile appeared for the briefest of a second.

Lasky's gaze hardened, "Lieutenant Austen, open fire, main battery. Target their flagship, full power."

"Aye, sir." Lieutenant Austen replied. The enemy flagship was highlighted a brilliant red on the holotable's projection. "Energy projectors away."

The _Infinity's _bow came to life as two brilliant silver beams lanced across space and dissected the Batarian flagship. The burning beams of energy slashed through the 800-meter long vessel's kinetic barriers, cored through the meters of ceramic armor, and struck the reactor. The entire vessel exploded, ribbing and aflame chunks tumbling in space.

"Good shooting, Lieutenant." Lasky commented.

"Thank you, sir." Austen responded, "Shall I fire again?"

"No." Lasky said firmly, "Roland, open communications. I want everything that can pick up a signal to get this message."

Roland shrugged, "Done."

Lasky tapped his earpiece, "This is Captain Tom Lasky, commander of the UNSC _Infinity_ and her escorts. Surrender your human prisoners to us and we will allow you to live. Forgo our option and your fate will be very much similar to that of your commander's. You have 60 seconds to lower your shields and deactivate your weapons as a sign of surrender before I start destroying your ships. Lasky, out."

Roland crossed his arms, mentally ticking down the time. "Captain, they aren't surrendering."

"Give them a few more seconds." Lasky said, "Maybe they have some lag."

Roland rolled his eyes, "Still not surrendering."

"Blow them out of the sky." Lasky said.

"Aye, sir." Roland responded.

"All forces, this is Lasky. Begin the assault!" Lasky walked towards the holotable as the projections of _Freelancer_ and the various _Obsidians_ raced away from _Infinity_. Pirate ships were blinking off the display at a rapid rate and the ones with UNSC prisoners onboard were disabled. Alien mass driver rounds slammed into the shields of the UNSC forces, giving them moments of pause but ultimately it was futile. The _Infinity_ had moved to deliver a broadside towards the enemy fleet. 70mm railgun and Onager slugs,

pulse lasers and missiles shot out of their housings and slammed into the surviving alien fleet. Explosions dotted the fleet as Batarian fighters and frigates died en masse.

"Enemy fleet neutralized, Captain." Roland reported, "No casualties."

Lasky looked to the command staff, "Good work everyone."

"Sir." A communications ensign said, "I have a Captain James Cutter on the line."

Lasky tapped his earpiece. "Captain Cutter."

The radio buzzed with static and the sounds of explosions. Assault Rifles roared in the background along with the deep boom of a tank-borne railgun firing. "_Infinity Actual, we need immediate assistance. We have xeno forces amassing around __the __city. Armored forces have breached the west gate and we have street-to-street fighting __in the southern districts.__ Any assistance you could send would be greatly appreciated!"_

"Captain, this is _Infinity _Actual. We have forces en route. The bad guys are going to be for a world of hurt in about 10 minutes."

Cutter's assault rifle roared over the radio channel, "_Understood Infinity! Good to have you here. Cutter, out."_

Lasky supported himself on the holotable, "Roland, move us into orbit. Have Palmer and 117 ready for immediate drop."

"Aye, sir." Roland replied. "Done. They'll be deploying in ten. 117 will be leading the armored forces of Gypsy and Timber Wolf."

Lasky quickly ran through the composition of the two companies. Gypsy and Timber Wolf companies combined had over 75 M808C _Scorpion_ Main Battle Tanks, 8 Mammoths, 120 Mantis mechs, dozens of Sparrow Hawk and Vulture gunships, scores of Warthogs of various types and 4 HRUNTING Mark III (B) _Cyclops _Mark II Heavy Mechs. It was a significant force and that large of a force being deployed was enough to give even the largest of Storm armies pause. They would form the spearhead of the assault force against the Batarians while Commander Palmer would lead Horizon and Eternity division, a duo of mixed divisions composing of primarily air assets, infantry, and light attack vehicles. Six Spartan Fire Teams would be the primary infantry assault force, deploying behind enemy lines and wrecking havoc while 117 and Palmer took on the main elements.

"Roland, have Marine Battalions Alpha through Charlie deploy to Cutter's main city to help clean out the enemy from the buildings." Lasky added. "If need be, Spartan Fire Team Lancer will be deployed to assist them."

"Aye, sir." The AI replied.

"One more thing, Roland."

"Yes, sir?"

Lasky looked over to the AI, "How long ago do you think they settled here? Their city is massive and seemingly well equipped."

The holotable's projection transformed into that of the city. A massive wall encircled the settlement and multiple anti-air batteries and other weapons dotted the top. The aft section of the wall and city was built into a dense mountain range dotted with hidden weapon emplacements. There were several multi-level buildings inside the wall with one massive structure dominating the center. Lasky knew its profile, it was the grounded form of the UNSC Spirit of Fire. Behind it was a massive skyscraper, at least twenty stories tall. It had a dark black sheen and reached high above the wall.

Roland leaned back on his left hip, "At least ten years, judging by the level of urbanization and development. It's amazing, they've designed this city to be easily defensible and the interior layout of the roads and such harkens back to ancient designs meant to confuse and disorientate any invaders."

"So, they're well prepared." Lasky responded.

"Aye, sir." Roland said, "And, judging by sub-surface scans, they have a significant portion of their manufacturing, administration, and military forces below surface or inside the hollowed-out mountain." Roland's expression soured, "Wait a minute..."

"What?" Lasky inquired.

"I'm detecting several surface-to-space batteries, mainly Mark 3 M109 Tiger Coil Guns installed in several smaller mountains around the main city. There are bombardment craters from mass drivers around the base of the Tigers, it seems to be that this isn't the first time Cutter has been attacked."

"Sir." Lieutenant Commander Sebastian interjected.

"What is it?" Lasky asked.

"Three surviving Batarian vessels have been grouped together and are surrounded by Obsidians 3-9. They're the ones with UNSC transponders onboard."

Lasky crossed his arms, "Roland, have Commander Ansil board the vessels and secure our crew. Capture their commanders if possible."

"Aye, sir." Roland replied, "Oh, 117 and Palmer are deploying now. Spartan Fire Teams will drop in five."

"Thank you, Roland." Lasky said, "All deployed Broadwords are to go on patrol and assist the ground forces if needed. Obsidian 3 and 4 are to be on station."

****UNSC Freelancer****

Commander Jennifer Ansil was a tall woman with steely blue eyes, aristocratic features, and light brown hair tied back in a ponytail. She wore her uniform with ease, she was a career soldier and it showed. Her expression remained neutral as she sat in her command chair. Her eyes studied the display that was a 15 inches from her

eyes. The remaining Batarian fighters were amassing on a direct assault on her vessel.

"Weapons." Jennifer barked out, "All pulse lasers, ready to fire. Set to range of 500 kilometers. Fire when in range."

Her weapons officer nodded and the display switched to that of an exterior camera on the top of the _Freelancer_. The bumps of laser emitters glowed red and the light-speed bolts of radiation lanced out. The Batarian fighters exploded, irradiated husks all that remained.

"Main line has breached our defenses." Jennifer's sensors officer reported.

Jennifer nodded, "Bring Onagers online, fire when ready."

"Aye, ma'am. Onagers online."

Her display switched to that of a Onager's gun recording camera. White streaks slashed away from _Freelancer_, _Batarian fighters shattering without as much as an explosion as the multi-centimeter slug penetrated the thin hull and gutted the fragile craft.

More fighters winked off the screen until none remained. The _Infinity_ had taken orbit directly above the _Spirit Of Fire_'s settlement with escort Obsidians flanking her. The Broadwords had begun dropping into atmosphere, likely beginning attack runs.

"Ma'am." Her communications officer said, "I have Roland on the line."

Jennifer looked over to the man and nodded, "Pipe it through."

He nodded quickly, "Yes, ma'am."

"_C__ommander __Ansil." _Roland's pleasant voice came through.

"Roland, what can I do for your fine captain?" Jennifer responded. She pushed the display arm away and walked towards the bridge window. It was blocked by thick sheets of armor, but that would soon change. She could hear the hydraulics groan as they pushed the multi-ton bridge back out of the armor belt of _Freelancer_.

"_Captain Lasky wants you to re__scue UNSC personnel from several of those captured Batarian vessels. Capturing the Pirate Captains would also be nice."_

Jennifer crossed her arms, watching as drop pods, Pelicans, pods, and Mechs emerged from the _Infinity_ like a swarm of angry bees. Thousands of soldiers, hundreds of vehicles, dozens of fighters were being deployed onto the planet below.

"Roland, tell Captain Lasky we'll be ready." Jennifer said, "I'll have the Headhunters assemble."

"_Aye, ma'am. Good luck_."The channel was cut.

Jennifer turned to her second-in-command, a towering figure dressed in olive green armor. The side of his face was dominated by a tattoo of a fist full of arrows. He cradled a MJOLNIR Scout helmet with a thin gold visor.

Spartan Jun-A266.

"Sergeant Major." Jennifer said.

"Commander." Jun responded calmly.

"I want you to take the Headhunters and secure those vessels. _Freelancer_ and a few Obsidians will be observing and carrying reinforcements if need be."

Jun nodded, "I can do that. Capture or kill any alien commanders?"

"Capture them alive. Infinity Actual is going to interrogate them, find out why they attacked." Jennifer told Jun, "And, if you could, find a way to access their database and download as much of it as you can."

Jun nodded, "Understood."

Jennifer turned away from the window and walked back towards her command chair. "These aliens wanted to mess with humanity. Let's show them how we respond to such aggression."

****Gypsy Company****

****Pelican 412****

****On surface****

John's boots hit the ground with a thud, his motion sensors instantly coming alive and scanning the surrounding area. Four red pings blinked on the small display and he snapped his DMR up. Four .338 Lapua Magnum Depleted Uranium-Armor Piercing rounds streaked across the field and impaled the Batarians in the forehead. Their craniums exploded like watermelons being hit with an auto cannon as the heavy caliber round passed through them at hypersonic velocities. John rolled to the side as the rest of Fireteam Venator disembarked.

ATEN drones quickly zoomed towards the outcropping of buildings that lay beyond the partially destroyed section of the City wall and the HUSAD slowly lowered itself onto the ground, ocular sensor probing. Together, the hundreds of drones being deployed by Gypsy and Timber Wolf companies alone linked and began sharing data, forming a massive repository of data and information.

John looked up at the sky; dozens of Pelicans, Albatross, and fighters streaked by, leaving supersonic lines in their wake. M808C Scorpions, Warthogs, Mantis Mechs, and dozens of other vehicles were being deployed. The booms of railguns and the hissing of missiles rapidly becoming louder and more numerous as the full power of _Infinity_ was deployed.

"John, Major Stacker is leading the armored attack_."_ Cortana said, "But there's been a change of plans."

"What is that?" John inquired. He and Venator started moving towards the opening in the City's wall, neutralizing the few Batarians that got in their way.

"Infinity has detected Spartan IDs." Cortana said simply, "It's Red Team."

John's heart nearly leaped out of his chest. Jerome, Alice, and Douglas were alive? He steeled himself, "What's their situation?"

"Pinned down, enemy forces converging on their position." Cortana quickly rattled off, "I have _Infinity_'s bombardment guns online but Red Team is held up in a power generation plant. If I destroy it, we all die in a 50 megaton boom."

John stopped for a second, "Tell Captain Lasky I am moving to rendezvous with Red Team."

"Done." Cortana responded instantly, "What about Venator?"

John looked back. Venator had been stopped at a secondary wall where dozens of Batarians and several turrets formed a choke hold.

"Fireteam Venator, suppression fire!" John barked as he grabbed a M67 Frag Grenade from his waist.

"_Understood." _Daniel responded. His Basilisk Assault Rifle kept rattling, a Batarian suddenly missing the majority of its torso.

Melinda momentarily peeked out of cover and put a blanket of .50 caliber bullets down range. Several Batarians were reduced to pink mist, completely eviscerated by the concentrated fire while the majority simply took cover to allow their shields to recharge. She rolled back into cover, alien bullets nipping at her shields.

John pumped his legs and sprinted towards the opening, his modified armor channeling more energy into his shields. He could feel bullets slap at his shields and the meter was rapidly dropping. He primed the grenade and threw it at the base of the foremost turret. It exploded, sparks, debris, and guts dousing the aliens next to it. John ran and jumped, leaping into the air. He landed with a massive crash to the ground and grabbed the neck of the nearest alien. He clenched it, hearing the sickening crunch of bones before hurling the dead alien at one of its comrades. Both slammed into the wall with incredible force, slumping to the ground and leaving a bloody stain.

One of the Batarians had a shotgun and brought John's shields down. The Spartan rolled to the side, kicked the Batarian in the mid riff and followed up with an upper cut. The Batarian screamed before his neck was broken. John grabbed the falling body, turned and used it as a shield. With one hand, John grabbed one of his submachine guns while the other hand held the body by the neck.

His submachine gun fired in four quick bursts and a Batarian's head exploded. By now, one of the gunners had managed to swing his turret around. Heavy caliber bullets dropped John's partially-recharged

shields immediately and he felt them strike against his armor. He rolled to the side, activating the photo reactive panels on his armor and grabbing his DMR.

He ran forward, blending into the environment like a cameleon. The Batarian was still firing blindly, a seemingly never ending stream of bullets lashing out and destroying everything. John snuck up behind the Batarian, fired point blank to drop the alien's shields and finished by snapping the thing's neck.

"Venator, move forward." John ordered, bringing his DMR up and downing two more hostiles with precise shots to the forehead.

"_Yes, sir!"_ Daniel responded. The ATEN drone squadron was the first to move in, adding its own firepower. Next was the HUSAD, Zack and Cole, everybody else followed them. Allowing the up-shielded Spartans to absorb the bit of fire that was leaking through or not focused on John.

"Cortana, patch me through to Red Team."

Cortana didn't respond for a moment. "Done, be quick though. They're on an old frequency, I'm not sure how long I can keep it coherent due to all the interference and EM being emitted."

"Understood." John responded. "Spartan Red Team, this is Commander Sierra-117. UNSC Infinity. Come in."

"_This is Sierra-042."_ Spartan Douglas responded, "_John, is that you?"_

The world seemed to slow down to John.

One of his living brothers.

"Douglas, this is John." 117 responded,

"_John, it's good to he__ar__ from __you._" Douglas responded, the rattle of MA5B fire easily audible over the comm link. "_We have hostiles converging on all sides. If you could send in air support, that would be welcome!"_

"Take cover." John ordered. "I'll have air support on station in five."

"_Understood, sir. Red Team, out."_

"Cortana, get me Palmer."

"Done." Cortana responded.

"_Palmer here._"

"Commander, I have a Spartan Team pinned down. What air forces do you have in this region?" John uploaded Red Team's position.

Sarah paused for a moment, "_I can have an AC-220 Gunship and a squad of Hornets in the area in two minutes."_

"Do it." John responded.

"_Understood. Black-Dog Squadron, you're on deck."_ Palmer responded.
"_Palmer, out."_

The roar of jet engines boomed overhead as four AV-14C Hornet Attack VTOLs and an AC-220 Vulture Gunship screeched past John and Fire Team Venator. The buzzing roar of .50 caliber and 30mm gatling railguns quickly followed, accented by the rapid screech of Argent VI missiles.

John blinked and the corpses of UNSC marines were stretched out around him, blue blood and Covenant bodies amassed around him. Looking down, he discovered he carried an MA37 Assault Rifle and Cortana's presence was no more. He looked up, a Spartan was there, dressed in gold and black armor. A flash and the Spartan's upper body disappeared in red mist.

"Sir."

John blinked again, he was back with Venator. Back on _this_ Reach.

"Sir. We should rendezvous with Red Team." Daniel said.

John didn't respond, eyes locked ahead where the unknown Spartan had been a few seconds ago.

"Sir!" Daniel said, voice firm and a touch louder.

John looked back, "Follow me."

John's visor flashed red and blue, lines of static raced down it. Pain enveloped his body and he crumpled to his knees. "Cortana!"

Her image flashed across his visor, "John!"

"Cortana!" He barked, "What's happening!"

"I don't..." She was cut off in a screech of static.

"Cortana!"

"_And so you come again, yet not back to our home. Back to a place where we both fled."_ A dark, booming voice groaned. "_A decision that will haunt you for many years to come, Reclaimer."_

"John!" Cortana yelled, "I'm here!"

"_And your greatest love will burn."_ The voice said again, "_The Mantle must be preserved...you are violators of my creators' work."_

"Oh, just sod off already!" Cortana snarled.

John felt the pain fade and he grappled himself up off the ground.
"What happened?"

"I don't know, there was something...it was hacking into your suit." Cortana responded. "It was cold, very cold."

John pulled himself up fully. He took a deep breath, focusing on the mission ahead. Those visions though... they were so much like the Gravemind's. "Come on. We need to find Red Team, then we can figure out what is going on."

He looked around, Venator had formed around him, Cole having the medical kit front and center.

"Sir?" Daniel asked, depolarizing his visor. "What was that?"

John looked back at him, "Nothing." He lied.

"Bullshit, sir." Daniel responded, "You're _the Master Chief_...well Commander now, but still. Nothing brings you to your knees that isn't some Cthulhu-wannabe."

"We'll deal with whatever happened later." John responded, looking back to Daniel. "We have a job to do."

"Sir, if this effects your combat viabil..." Daniel stuttered as Chief glided over to only a few inches away from his face.

"It won't. Now, we're going to go find Red Team." John said coldly, "Understood?"

"Yes, sir." Daniel responded.

Something was wrong.

****Disabled Batarian Vessel****

Jun checked his Basilisk Assault Rifle for one last time, racking back the bolt and examining the smart scope. Around him were four Spartan III's clad in all black armor; the headhunters. They shimmered as they moved, their active camouflage at its lowest setting. Several more marines in fully sealed armor flanked them, armed with a variety of either shotguns, DMRs, or Basilisk Assault Rifles.

Jun switched his HUD, a small video window showing an animation of the _Freelancer_'s docking tube cutting through that of the Batarian vessel's hull. He braced himself as the multi-ton docking tube slammed into the hull. Nanites and cutting lasers instantly began their work, slicing and melting through the hull and creating a tight enough seal for Jun and his team to enter the vessel.

The indicator lights above the compartment flashed blue and then green. Jun brought his assault rifle up, active camo and stealth armor mod activating. The Headhunters quickly followed. ATEN and HUSAD drones sent out a pulse to the Marine's armor, cloaking them in a mass camo field.

"We have airtight seal." The computer drawled. "Hatch ready."

Jun glided forward and slammed his armored fist into the pulsating green button. He stepped back, snapping up his Basilisk and watching as the door slid open. Before the first bullet crossed the distance to strike Jun's shield, he had flung himself against the wall, sprinting through the fire and quickly dispatching the

Batarian.

ATEN drones swooped in, followed by Marines and HUSAD drones. Bullets, grenades, and fists flew through the air as Marines took up firing positions behind the heavily armored forms of the HUSADs while the automated war machines strafed their targets with rounds.

Jun moved like a skater on the rink, dodging and weaving in between bursts of fire, punctuated by the cry of a Batarian soldier as an Obsidian blade sliced through their chests, leaving two cleaved sections. The occasional quick snap was barely heard as his suppressed Assault Rifle chewed through Kinetic Barriers and armor alike.

A Batarian primed a grenade and flung it. It stuck against a HUSAD and detonated, drone and the six Marines behind it vanishing in a massive explosion that nearly ruptured the hull of the small Batarian vessel.

The surviving Marines advanced forward and reprogrammed the ATEN drones to intercept grenades thrown. The HUSAD's turrets lashed out, rounds striking and detonating grenades.

A Marine slipped out of cover, firing as he hurried to the other side. A Batarian soldier took aim and fired; bullets struck the marine in the soldier and he dropped his rifle, screaming in pain as the arm was nearly severed. The quad-eyed grinned behind his helmet and fired again. Twenty bullets struck the Marine's chest and sent him flying against the wall. His chest was almost completely destroyed.

His squad retrieved their M44 Smart MOAB Surface-to-Surface Rocket Anti-Vehicle Weapon and fired it. A quartet of independent smart missiles shot out. The four 102mm missiles lanced across the distance and detonated, the Batarians and everything around them instantly vaporized by the airburst and subsequent detonation. The rockets' computer system had scaled the detonation to fit the area; if it had been at full power and potential, the entire compartment and everything within 25 meters would have been destroyed and exposed to vacuum.

Jun felt charred chunks of alien slap against his shields and he rolled to the side, bringing up his machete and driving it through the torso of the last remaining alien, watching as the comparatively small alien sputtered and died. The Spartan pulled the blade out. As the Batarian dropped to its knees, he finished the alien off, slashing through the beast's neck and flinging the blood off.

Jun looked back, stashing his knife on his armor. The Marines had moved their dead and injured back into an air lock and were regrouping, using their drones as cover.

Shimmers of air caught Jun's attention as his Headhunters—"Spartan IIIs specializing in stealth, assassinations and black ops"—deactivated their active camo systems.

"Good work." Jun said neutrally.

"Thank you, sir." The lead one responded.

"Ramsey, how far away are we from the IFFs?" Jun asked.. He walked forward towards the only other door in the room. He reached out his hand and touched it. It was rusty and oddly warm, almost slick to the touch.

"Just behind that door, sir." Warrant Officer Ramsey replied. He looked at his tac-pad on his wrist and typed a few commands into the capacitive touch screen. "Composition is an unknown material, it's not going to come down easily."

Jun nodded and gestured for one of the combat engineers to move forward. The woman quickly adhered the breaching explosive along the door. She quickly gestured for everybody to get back before she pressed the firing stud. Plasma cutters burned through the resistance before shaped explosives shattered the door.

The dust quickly cleared and Jun stepped through the opening, Assault Rifle ready. Lights snapped on and what he saw made his stomach flip.

There were dozens of humans forming countless piles. Blood and other fluids coated the floor and the horrified expressions of the deceased seemingly stared directly at Jun. Body parts were strewn across the room and devices of torture hung from the wall.

"Captain Lasky, this is Headhunter Actual. We have a total loss, no living humans. They're all dead."

Lasky didn't respond for a few seconds, "_Bring me the monsters who did this."_

"Yes." Jun responded. "Yes, sir. What about the bodies?"

Lasky sighed over the land, "_Scan their IFFs, get their names and basic information. We'll destroy the ship, our comrades shouldn't be given to the stars in this state. __The other Batarian ships have been secured, we'll treat their captains as they did our brothers."_

"Understood."

"_Lasky, out."_

****En route to Red Team ****

"This is Sierra-117, requesting immediate assistance." John barked into this radio, "We have hostile armored forces moving towards us."

Venator had fanned out, using the bit of cover available to avoid the squadron of alien tanks' barrages. There was a sharp snap and a brilliant bolt screamed over John's head, slamming into a building behind him and gutting it completely.

John rolled to the side and fired fruitlessly at one of the tanks, drawing its fire away from his team. He quickly evaded as another railgun slug streaked past him and smacked into debris, cutting through it like a hot knife through warm butter.

"_This is Atlan-1, we are on station, Commander."_

John looked up, high in the sky was the unmistakable form of a AC-180 _Trailblazer_ Gunship. Looking back down, he tapped several commands into his tac-pad. The enemy tanks were now painted a bright, neon green.

"Atlan-1, targets are marked in green. Fire when ready." John said.
"Venator, take cover."

Green acknowledgment lights blinked as Venator ran for cover, diving behind thick barriers or pieces of debris. John grabbed one of his bubble shields and activated it, a bubble of energy encapsulating him. He squared his hips and brought his right hand out, a blue hard light shield springing to life.

Atlan-1 began firing. Two 105mm railgun slugs lanced down on the Batarian tanks, piercing their kinetic barriers and coring through their armor belt. 70mm slugs followed next, strafing the infantry lines and exterminating the damaged tanks. The two surviving war machines turned their attention to the sky and fired. John could see flares as the AC-180 was struck amidship and rolled to avoid fire, the electro-reactive armor protecting the gunship. Dozens of missiles streaked off its form and raced down, striking the remaining tanks with the first of an angry god. The tanks exploded, plumes of smoke and fire erupting from within and the aflame crew members crawling out, screaming in agony.

Another barrage of 70mm AP-I slugs silenced the screams and reduced any survivors to ashes and remains. One final 105mm MOAB round shot down from _Atlan_-1 and detonated, vaporizing everything within fifty metersâ€"â€"even the air.

"_This is Atlan-1_, _targets neutralized."_

"Understood, Sierra-117 out." John responded.

Atlan-1 banked and flew off, engaging its afterburners and streaking away at hypersonic velocities. Several Broadwords and F-106 Viper UCAV-F drone fighters followed it seconds later, wings laden with guns and bombs.

Venator left their cover and converged on John. He deactivated the bubble shield, picking up the emitter and placing it on his waist line again.

"I wish your friends had been a little bit more careful when they decided to commence their attack run." Zack said cynically.

John stared at the younger Spartan, face devoid of emotion. These certainly weren't his class' type of Spartans. Looking back away, John reloaded his Basilisk and walked towards the destroyed remains of the enemy tanks.

"Red Team, this is Sierra-117. We are five minutes out."

"Understood, sir." Douglas responded, "We have it under control and we have reports that fighting is dying out across the city. Alien forces are being routed as we speak."

John nodded, "Understood. We'll be at your position soon."

"Thank you." Douglas said, "And John?"

"Yes?"

"It's good to hear from you again, brother."

John smiled inwardly.

"_And they are violators too."_ That dark voice whispered again.

****UNSC Infinity****

****60 minutes post invasion****

****Interrogation Chamber****

Jalokay looked up, four black eyes scanning the darkened interior that he was trapped in. He tried to get up, thrashing on his restraints only to discover them tightening with every bit of resistance that he exerted. Tugging again, he managed to bring his feet a few inches from the ground before the chains around them tightened suddenly. The table he was attached to seemingly shrunk and as his legs struck against the newly blunt edge, he heard a series of sickening crunches and cried out in pain as his legs snapped.

He withered in pain, trying to escape but was pushed back down on the table. A series of three blinding lights snapped on directly over his form. He winced as his eyes adjusted.

"So." A dry female voice called out, "You are scared, confused. In pain?"

The table became red hot and Jalokay screamed as his back was burned. The heat disappeared within a few seconds but he could feel his skin almost fuse with the metal.

"I'll take that as a yes." The woman said flatly. She stepped out of the shadows, brandishing a long, curved knife affixed to her waist. Her hands were clasped behind her back and dark eyes studied the prone Jalokay. She had a short, dark pony tail that made her appearance even more menacing.

"You bitch!" Jalokay snarled, "I'll kill you! The Alliance will pay!"

"Honey." She said, "I'm not Alliance."

"Then who are you?"

"I am Lieutenant Larson, Office of Naval Intelligence." She responded.

Jalokay strained his neck and spit at her. She dodged it and instead drew her blade.

She circled around the tethered Batarian, examining the edge of her blade. "I always did enjoy the Vikings. No, not the football team.

They never won the Super Bowl, damn it. No, I'm talking about the ancient warriors; they had such interesting interrogation techniquesâ€"it got information out of people quickly, albeit some we wouldn't do on you.."

She pressed a button on a parallel pedestal and the Batarian's table inclined so that his legs were upwards. "Problem is, most of their prisoners died due to them. That's not a problem for us though."

"What are you going to do?" Jalokay asked.

"Me?" Annabelle asked, "I'm just going to get some information from you. If you don't mind, of course." She cracked a wicked smile.

"You aren't fools like the Alliance." The Batarian sneered.

"No, we're not." Annabelle stated. "We're UNSC."

****Unknown Location****

Operative Cross' footsteps reverberated across the chamber of the Illusive Man. She clenched in her left hand her standard datapad, intelligent eyes scanning the area and settling upon the sitting form of her employer. They had just received word from their operative in the Reach system.

The Illusive Man's hair was slicked back, as usual, and he had forgone the standard cigarette in place of a small glass of brandy. Numerous holographic displays floated around him and his oddly blue eyes scanned them. The star looming; and dominating the view of the chamber was still churning, a constant battle between blue and crimson plasma for dominance.

"Sir." Operative Michelle Cross said, "We have a casualty repor..."

The Illusive Man cut her off, "How many dead?"

"Four hundred." Cross responded, "Four hundred humans, all dead in cold blood."

"I know." The Illusive Man snapped, "I know how many of my brethren have been slain."

"This doesn't bother you? Four hundred people killed?" Cross growled, chucking the datapad into her superior's lap.

"Watch your tongue, Operative." He responded, standing up. He swallowed the bit of brandy remaining in the glass and set it down on the chair's arm rest. He glided towards the window, arms crossed.

"What is our plan? Casualties are much higher than we expected." Cross questioned.

The Illusive Man peered over his shoulder, "The dead, they were mainly from Cutter's crew. Correct?"

Cross nodded, "Yes, sir. The crew of the Infinity only lost a few

people and those were on the ground."

"This was an unforeseen occurrence." The Illusive Man stated, "But our plan will commence as scheduled. Lasky and his Spartans will be changed."

"What do you mean?" Cross asked, "Four hundred dead will have a lasting impact."

"I know. We must adapt." He responded, "I must ask, why were casualties so high?"

"The Batarians fired on population centers from orbit and deployed shock troopers. They captured, tortured, raped, and killed." Cross said, tone laced with venomous hatred for the Batarians and for her superior's seemingly nonchalant reaction.

The Illusive Man bowed his head, "That fucking animal. I told him to minimize casualties, not wipe the god damn population out!" He snarled.

"Lasky captured several Batarian crews and vessels." Cross added.

"Their commanders?" The Illusive Man questioned. "Their commanders, did he capture them?"

Cross nodded, "Yes. They are in cells onboard the Infinity. They've been bound and Lasky is extracting information from them."

"Lasky will have them executed." The Illusive Man said, "His veil of civility will finally be shattered."

"You think..."

"No." Illusive Man interjected, "I know."

"Know what?"

"There is a beast in every man and it stirs when you put a sword in his hand." The Illusive Man responded, "And thus, the Alliance will be thrown into war. Tenzing will be detected soon...and with it, everything else will fall into place."

"Are you sure of that, sir?" Cross asked. Her doubts were increasing by the moment.

"Yes. And Lasky will do as he did when I knew him."

"What's that?"

"Endure."

"Are you sure?" Cross asked.

"My dear, I knew our fine captain for a long time—he won't fail." The Illusive Man said.

"And if he does fail?"

"Then we will all fall with him." He lit a new cigarette and took a draw from it.

"Die?" Cross growled, "For what? If the light of Cerberus goes out, so does the light of mankind."

"Hardly, my dear. We'd be preventing a much worse fate." The Illusive Man stated simply.

"A fate worse than slavery, death and abuse?"

"A fate where you are eternally tethered to a single mind, a fate where you are made to fight." He turned around and rolled his sleeve up, revealing intricate lines of glyphs and pulsating blue circuitry. "A fate to be an abomination."

Cross stepped back, "Are...are you?"

"Human?" The Illusive Man asked, "Of course. But not fully; he made sure of that." The Illusive man closed his eyes, "Even now, I can still feel his whisper."

"And who is he?"

"The Dark Son."

She pursed her lips and walked away, leaving her superior to stand there, examining his arm. The Illusive Man had been wrong before, albeit only a few times. But could he be wrong this time? Intelligence was getting harder to track when it came to the Infinity, and the Illusive Man had started to act strangelyâ€"lapses in judgment, errors.

She just hoped he wasn't wrong this time.

****To be continued...****

****Next chapter, ****Tenzing is detected by the Infinity, Salarian Intelligence, and the fires of war are ignited. Stay tuned!****

****Thanks for reading. ****

****3 Sith****

7. Chapter 7: The Link, Part 2

The Onyx Stars

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

AN: Tons of thanks to WarpObscura, Imperial Waltz, JonHarper (Spartan303) and Atlan, again, for beta-ing and helping the plot be smoothed out. Also, wow! Reaction to this is stellar!

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

****Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been changed for the purpose of the story.****

Here's Chapter 7: The Link, part 2

Enjoy :)

3 Sith

EDIT: 3-27-2013: Fixed a bolding error due to a FF glitch that has persisted for years.

EDIT: 3-31-2013: Fixed a formatting error due to FF being glitchy...again.

****Chapter *****Seven*****: *****The Link, *****part 2****

****UNSC *****_**Infinity**_**

****Captain's Quarters****

Thomas Lasky lit his cigarette, putting it to his lips and inhaling deeply. Gazing out his quarter's bay windows, he slowly exhaled, eyes studying the swirling planet below. Pin pricks of explosions dotted the green and blue colony world, each signifying the death of countless Batarians and pirates—he had sent overwhelming force to quell them but the damage had already been done.

Almost 500 people dead; bodies stacked like wood in various states of decay.

He shivered and took another draw off his cigarette.

The door chimed twice, a bland digital tone ringing through his room.

Eyes locked onto the planet below, Lasky softly said, "Come in."

The doors parted and Commander Sarah Palmer stepped in, eyes quickly examining the room and settling onto the standing form of her commanding officer. Her lips settled into a straight, tight line and her stare became hard.

"Tom."

Lasky looked back, "What is it, Sarah?"

She walked forward, armor audibly clanking. Setting down a datapad on the coffee table at the center of the room, she sat down on the black couch behind it. "I am giving the latest reports to you."

"That's all?" Lasky asked. "I know you better than that."

Sarah smirked, "No, of course not."

"Then what?" He asked, extinguishing the cigarette and walking forward, taking a seat to the opposite of Palmer's.

"You." Sarah responded, "I know you're taking these

deaths..."

"Hard?" Lasky interrupted. He gestured towards the window, "All those deaths are because we were too slow, because we weren't quick enough."

Sarah's eyes softened, "Tom, you and I both know that everyone murdered didn't die because we were too slow. They all died because some four-eyed freak decided to get off by slaughtering innocents."

Lasky's hands were on his lap and he stared outside like he was in a trance. "500...we..."

"We lost more when the Promethean invaded and killed the old man." Sarah said. "600 dead."

Lasky looked at her, "I don't know why..."

"Because, Tom." Palmer said, "You're reaching burn-out. For the past few weeks, we've been either fighting ancients bent on the extermination of humanity or space robots and pirates. Not to mention that we're in a completely different universe now."

Tom signed, leaning forward and redirecting his stare from the stars to the floor. "You're right."

Sarah leaned forward and put her hand on his shoulder. Tom looked up and their eyes met, "Tom, you need to push through this. We're counting on you to get us home, all of us."

"Sarah." Tom responded, "I don't think I'm cut out for this. Hell, I wasn't even given command due to merit. Politics is why I was promoted."

Sarah gritted her teeth, "Bullshit. You are one of the best officers in the fleet, that much is obvious! You were put in command to deal with the old man's stick-in-the-mud personality...he knew how to manage people; not a starship and he certainly was no Admiral Cole when it came to space combat."

Lasky sighed, "You're right. I don't know why suddenly I'm all...weird."

Sarah smiled faintly, "Because, you've always been like this; you never think you're good enough. Well, I'm going to tell you this. You are good enough, you will get us home, and you will bring _everyone_ home."

"Ok." Tom responded.

"_Captain, this is Roland. We request your presence on the bridge. Batarian forces are retreating and we're in a perfect position to start bombardment." _Lasky's radio chirped, "_Oh, Commander Palmer's IFF is in...oh...um..."_

"It's nothing, Roland." Lasky said, smirking. Palmer was chuckling, "I'll be right up."

"_Understood, sir. Roland, out..."_

"Showtime, Tom." Palmer said.

UNSC _Infinity_

"Forces are routing the remaining Batarians, sir." Roland reported, turning towards Lasky as he entered the bridge "I'm having Obsidian 5 move into position and provide support fire."

Captain Lasky nodded moving towards the holotable. His eyes latched onto an ever changing projection of the battlefield. "Ventral batteries alpha through delta, target enemy armored forces in sector 20. Full bombardment."

Roland nodded, "Aye, sir. Instructions given to gunnery crews."

Infinity's ventral batteries came alive; pulse lasers, railgun rounds, and missiles streaking down from high orbit and slamming into the planet below. Bombardment continued for three minutes, the two-acre area of sector 20 was scorched black and pitted from the impact of hypersonic railgun rounds. Even the husks of enemy tanks had been incinerated, either by the MOAB-armed missiles or the multi-gigawatt pulse lasers.

"Enemy forces neutralized, Captain." Roland reported, "117's and Palmer's forces are moving in. Obsidian 5 is on station and providing support fire."

Lasky nodded, "Move us into position over Cutter's city, start transporting the wounded up here."

"Yes, sir." Roland responded, hands clasped behind his back.

Lasky pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and pointer finger, trying to relieve the stress tension there. "If you had told me a few months ago I'd be in another universe with _the _Master Chief, I wouldn't have believed you."

"Sir?" Roland asked.

"Nothing." Lasky commented, setting the datapad on the edge of the holotable. He glided over to the bridge's massive window, eyes studying the stars. "Keep scanning the system."

"Aye, sir." Roland responded. "Why would that be exactly, if I may ask?"

Lasky glanced over his shoulder, "I just have an uneasy feeling about somethingâ€"I can't explain it exactly, it's like there's this little voice in my head saying 'be careful.'"

Roland's expression became puzzled, "Ah..okay?"

"Sir." Lieutenant Austen reported, "We have unknown missiles inbound, course 900 by 500 by 321."

"Redirect shields to impact zone." Lasky ordered, "Bring main batteries online, find me the attacker."

"Understood!" Lieutenant Austen responded. "Energy projectors and MACs online."

Roland flickered for a moment, "Sir, attackers are 40000 kilometers out, same course as the missiles."

"Understood."

"CIWS, open fire." Lasky ordered.

Austen's face hardened, "CIWS batteries are engaging, stealth is heavy on the missiles. We're essentially shooting at shadows."

"Estimated yield?" Lasky questioned.

"80 megatons a piece." Roland responded immediately. "Channeling power to shields."

Lasky slammed the intercom button. "All hands, incoming projectiles! Brace for impact!"

"Missiles are one kilometer away and closing. Impact in 15 seconds." Roland reported, "Shields at 150 percent and dropping at a rate of 2 percent a minute."

The two 80 megaton shaped charge missiles struck the port side of the Infinity, twin nuclear suns enveloping the massive warship. Shields flared as 160 megatons washed over them. Sparks flew across the bridge as power conduits and surge protectors gave out.

Lasky covered his head as a shower of sparks rained down from the power cables running overhead to the holotable. He gritted his teeth as he felt them ping off his uniform; they were burning hot.

"Report!" Lasky barked.

Roland's projector flickered as it tried to maintain a constant feed of power. "Damage on deck 9 through 12. Shields down to 60 percent. We have multiple casualties."

"Get medical teams down there! Deploy all repair drones." Tom ordered. "And find me the shooter!"

"Found 'em!" Austen shouted, "Small stealth craft."

"Life signs?"

"Seven." Roland stated, "I think they're human, but something's weird about them."

"How so?" Lasky asked.

"It's weird, it's like they're infected with a Flood organism but at the same time there is a distinctly synthetic presence."

"Flood?"

"I guess." Roland stated.

"Austen, open fire."

"Aye, sir!" The weapons officer responded all-too-eagerly. "Energy projectors away."

Two brilliant beams of energy slashed through space, impacting the much smaller craft and slicing it in two. Irradiated sections of the craft tumbled away, fuel and ejecta spilling into the void.

"Roland, prime a HAVOK, we can't allow any Flood particles to survive" Lasky ordered, "We'd all be doomed if an outbreak occurred."

"Understood." Roland responded. "Missile away."

Along the _Infinity_'s spine, a single HAVOK nuclear missile shot out from its VLS tube, arching through space and crossing the distance between the massive human warship and that of the debris field of the unknown craft. It detonated at the center of the destroyed vessel. 30 megatons of energy washed over the remains, incinerating everything. Any remains had been atomized by the sheer power.

"Good work, Roland." Lasky commented.

"Thank you, sir."

En route to Red Team

John felt Batarian rounds slap against his shields, a heavy machine gun nestled in an outcropping of debris and barriers strafing him and Venator with high-velocity rounds. Rolling to the side, John snapped his DMR up and fired. His aim was off and the four .338 Lapua DU-AP rounds pinged off the protective armor plating of the gun instead of coring into its operator.

"Venator, heavy weapons." John ordered.

"_Sorry, sir._" Daniel responded, "_We're out. __Mortars are gone too._"

John gritted his teeth, "Cortana, find me a way around this guy."

"Working on it." She responded, her image appearing in his HUD, "There."

John nodded, "Venator, suppressing fire!"

"_Understood._" _Daniel responded. He motioned for Melinda to prop her machine gun up on a crate and for the HUSAD drone to move to the front and center, machine gun chipping away at the pirates.

John slung his DMR and grabbed his twin submachine guns, running forward around the gunner. A destroyed vehicle blocked his way, so he pumped his legs and jumped over it, soaring over the heads of several Batarians. Flipping himself over in mid-air, he opened fire. Bullets racked the Batarians and sliced through them, blood splattering against the abandoned vehicle.

Landing on the ground with a thud, John spun on his heel and sprinted towards the massive gun's position. When he was close enough, he dove towards it, slamming into the gunner with his full weight and feeling the being crumple as bones cracked and organs exploded. He kicked the corpse away and turned the machine gun toward the piled up debris that was blocking him.

A solid stream of bullets chewed through the wreckage, pin pricks of light from the other side slowly seeping through. Cole walked forward, firing his M363 Remote Projectile Detonator and clearing out a significant swath of the debris.

"_John, this is Douglas." _117's radio chirped, "_We are en route to your position."_

"Understood, Sierra." John responded.

Three rockets impacted the wall of debris from the other side, blowing through it and showering John with pieces of debris. He took his fingers off the firing studs, the machine gun's barrels red hot.

He couldn't see through the settling dust cloud, he could only see the infra-red forms of three Spartans stalking towards him, MA5B assault rifles in their hands. John dismounted from the machine gun and walked forward; the world seemed to slow down around him.

"_This place will be your grave, Trespasser."_ A voice whispered to him.

"Cortana?" John asked.

"It wasn't me." She responded, "Something else is in your..."

John roared in pain; it felt like an energy sword had been thrust through his chest. He crumpled to the ground, Venator and Red Team rushing up to him.

Daniel looked up to Douglas-042, "To all UNSC forces, this is Venator Actual. 117 is down, repeat, 117 is down. Requesting medical evac."

****Unknown Location****

"Child of my master-turned-enemy, why have you returned to my realm?" The voice asked.

Cortana twisted around to try and pin-point the origin of the voice, "Who are you?"

A brilliant light flashed above her and a swirling orb of energy descended from it, constantly changing from red to blue. It floated a few feet away from her, thousands of disembodied voices gently whispering as it floated there. The digital landscape around it began to change, intricate Forerunner lines and glyphs crawling up and down the walls. The skybox changed, millions of ships engaging each other at light speed high above in orbit. The entire landscape was ablaze, ships crashing into towering Forerunner cities and consuming them in blinding flashes.

"I am the Dark Son." The AI responded, "You are not fit to know my real title, ancilla of my charges."

"You hurt John." Cortana said sharply, "You attacked _me _on the Citadel and here."

"You trespassed within my greatest device, a monument to my fallen father." It told her, "You invaded, nearly destroyed _my _absolute record."

Cortana crossed her arms, "Well, excuse me."

The AI shook for a second, the whispers increasing into a massive uproar, gradually dying as it began to speak. "You will ruin everything that I have worked to accomplish, to maintain the Mantle."

"You couldn't hide that from me. I know you are Forerunner, your signature is exactly like that of Guilty Spark and Mendicant Bias."

The AI flashed crimson, "He is here? In this realm?"

Cortana smirked. "Not telling."

The other AI swooped in close to her, "Tell me!" It snarled.

Cortana batted it away, "Sod off. I'm here to ask you why you have been in my visions...why you attacked me."

"I have already answered." The Dark Son responded.

"No." Cortana said, "You gave me a bullshit answer filled with this pseudo-cryptic crap. I've faced down gods and giant plants, I know when someone is feeding me b.s."

"I am beyond comprehension." It responded.

Cortana laughed, "That's funny. But seriously, answer my damn question before I rip you apart."

"No." The AI responded, "I am a Bias. You are a false construct."

Cortana backed away, "You are Bias?"

"I am a Bias." The AI responded, "And you are a threat!"

Bias sent an attack at Cortana, striking her in the chest and sending her across the landscape. She groaned in pain, clawing her way back up to stand. Flaring crimson, she flung an attack back at the AI, her attack slapping the Forerunner construct away, its firewalls flaring.

"You dare lay your hand on that of a Forerunner?" Bias roared. Lines of energy struck Cortana, dancing over her form and bringing her to her knees. She cried in pain as the Ancilla continued the attack, ripping through her defenses.

The attack ebbed for a few nanosecondsâ€”more than enough time for Cortana. She sent a devastating barrage of attacks, drawing Bias' attention away. She gritted her teeth, creating multiple copies of herself, just like she had done with the Gravemind. Her core runtime and program quickly fell back behind thousands of firewalls and 64 zetabyte encryptions. Bias was slaughtering through the copies, zeroing in on her, already diverting some of his attacks to probe at her firewalls. The first hundred shattered with a single attack and the encryptions were being undone in nanoseconds.

Cortana created more and more copies, continually running and distracting the unrelenting Bias. Calling upon her newly installed Forerunner software, she spawned several dozen attack viruses. Each of them tried to assault the Bias but failed, exterminated without even being recognized by the much more powerful artificial intelligence.

"So." Bias gloated, "The monument of Human computing fails to attacks that even the most idiotic of Forerunner builders would laugh off as elementary in composition."

Diving into her core processing functions and threads, Cortana searched for a way to stop Bias. He was in her runtime somehow, that was the only way she could explain his constant presence. She searched through trillions of active threads and processes until she found the single process that was responsible for his presence.

She purged it. Bias' attacks stop and she felt him fade away.

The environment he had created began to collapse, flickering into lines of code and eventually dissolving.

****Pelican 832****

****En route to UNSC _Infinity_****

John's eyes fluttered open, light stinging his pupils and causing him to wince in pain. Everything was muffled like he was underwater. He tried to move but discovered he was restrained, so he pushed back and easily snapped the leather holds on him.

"Sir!" Daniel barked.

John's sight returned to him and he saw Daniel, holding him down. Numerous medics buzzed around him, administering tests and checking his condition through his armor. He pushed them away and sat upright. He brought his armored hand up to his chest and felt it; no damage.

"Cortana?" He asked.

No response.

"Cortana?" He said again.

"John, I'm here." She finally responded.

"What happened?" John asked.

"Bias." Cortana responded, "He was in my processes, he had been

following us since I was repaired by the Huragok."

"Wait, Cortana. What Bias?" John questioned.

"The Biases were Forerunner AIs during the Flood War, Mendicant went rogue and Offensive was responsible for combating him." Cortana explained.

"Yes, I know that. I read the Terminals, but which bias." John cut her off.

"I don't know, it could have been a rampant shard of Mendicant or Offensive..." Cortana replied, "We're not alone, John. This entire galaxy, it's filled with stuff from our home."

John sighed, "We need to inform Captain Lasky."

He could feel Cortana shudder, "Agreed."

John looked around, "Where is Red Team, Daniel?"

"Another Pelican, sir." The Spartan 4 responded.

"Contact them." John ordered, "Tell them to meet Cortana and I in the Conference Room once they land."

Daniel nodded, "Aye, sir."

"Sir." Zack spoke up, "Whatever happened out there, my suit registered a solid slipspace connection out-system. I can't make heads or tails out of what this data means, but I'm sure your AI could."

John looked at the smaller Spartan, "When we land, give your data to Cortana."

"Yes, sir." Zack responded.

The Pelican rumbled as it breached Reach's atmosphere, engines flaring and sending the dropship toward's _Infinity's_ inviting hangars. Broadswords swooped in, taking up position around the Pelican carrying the commander of _Infinity_'s ground forces.

The Broadswords broke off when the Pelican reached the hangar's shield, peeling away and returning to their normal duties.

Pelican 832 set down, troop bay door dropping to the floor with a mechanical wine. John stepped out, followed by Venator. Red Team landed a few seconds later, Douglas stepping out of the bird and nodding towards John before being guided away by dock crews.

****UNSC _Infinity_****

Tom glanced to his wrist, eyes dancing over the wrist watch. 30 minutes had passed since the missile attack and he still had that uneasy, indescribable feeling. It was like someone had told him to be careful. He shivered, the bridge was oddly cold.

"Sir." Lieutenant Commander Sebastian said, "Commander 117 has landed with Red Team."

Lasky looked over, "Thank you, are they on their way here?"

Sebastian looked at his report again, "Ah...yes. They're taking a tram to the Bridge."

Lasky nodded. His eyes were locked onto the holographic projection of the _Infinity_.

"Sir?" Austen asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Lieutenant." Lasky replied, "Just feeling a bit off today, that's all."

Austen eyed him, "Yeah, sir...I'm not exactly believing that."

"Why's that?" Lasky questioned.

"Because." Austen said, "I've known you for long enoughâ€"nothing gets you all weird like this unless it's something big."

Lasky sighed, "I guess it's just the weight of command."

Austen shook his head, "No, it's not that. Have you been hearing them too?"

Lasky's eyes widened, "Wait, what?"

"This feeling at the back of your mind, almost warning you about something." Austen answered, "It's cold in here, no?"

"When did you start hearing these?" Lasky questioned.

"A few minutes before the missiles hit. I shrugged it off as just nerves at first, but the feeling persisted."

"Like a voice..." Lasky muttered.

"Exactly, sir." Austen responded.

The bridge doors parted and Lasky turned. John crossed over the threshold. His armor was covered in blood, dirt and grime yet his gold-orange visor was perfectly shined. He reached up to the back of his head and removed Cortana's chip, in one smooth movement inserting it into the holotable and allowing the incredibly powerful AI to project herself.

"Captain." John said, "Something's going on."

Lasky looked up at the massive super soldier. "What exactly?"

"Cortana, tell him." John said, looking down at his AI companion.

The AI looked at Lasky, "We aren't alone in this universe. Forerunner AIs and tech are here too."

Lasky narrowed his eyes, "How did you find this out?"

"A Forerunner AI, a Bias, attacked John and I on the Citadel and when we were fighting the Batarrians."

Lasky crossed his arms, "This Bias, what did he say?"

"We are trespassing...a threat to his plan and to the galaxy." Cortana answered, "We'd all burn."

"John, do you think this has any validity?" Lasky asked.

The Spartan nodded, "I do, sir. If there are Forerunner constructs in this universe, they pose a significant threat to us."

Lasky sighed, "And here I thought this was going to be an easy thing."

"Sir!" Roland said, flaring into existence alongside Cortana. He looked over momentarily at her before returning his gaze toward Lasky. "I've detected a distress signal."

"Why didn't we pick it up earlier?" Lasky asked.

Roland shrugged, "I have no clue, it was like someone lifted a blindfold from my sensors. Just...all of a sudden it was there."

"Play it." John ordered.

Cortana snapped her fingers and the audio began to play.

Lasky braced himself against the holotable, head down and ears attentive to the audio being played. What he was hearing was something completely out of the ordinary, something he had never expected to experience in his life time.

"_This is the UNSC Everest, we are adrift and without power. Requesting immediate assistance. Unknown location; weapons are offline and __engines are gone. Repeat, this is the UNSC Everest, __we are adrift and without power. __We have Sky King on board, repeat, we have Sky King on board."_

"How sure of this are you, Roland?" Lasky asked.

"Sure as I can be, Captain." The AI replied. "It's Cole's voice in the broadcast and that's the _Everest_'s IFF tag."

Sighing heavily, Lasky pushed himself away from the holotable. "Get Obsidian 7 on the line, tell them to ready for immediate departure to the aforementioned coordinates. When they give us the all clear, the _Infinity_ will drop in."

"Why not just drop in right away, sir?" Lieutenant Austen questioned, "_Infinity_ can handle anything that these people can throw at us."

Lasky looked over to the officer, "We don't know that at the moment, all we've faced are pirates and mercenaries. That big squid that attacked the Citadel was giving off equivalent power signatures to a

Covenant cruiser, who knows what its bigger brother is."

"Understood, sir." Austen responded.

"Commander Martin Jensen." Roland commented, "A good officer, if a bit hot-headed."

"Isn't that true for all of us?" Lasky asked, "The Old Guard is almost gone, most either died in the war or of age."

Roland smirked, "It's us youngsters now."

Lasky snorted. "I'm 45, I wouldn't consider myself a youngster."

"True, true." Roland said, "I guess I'm kinda old too. Dog years and all."

Lasky gave Roland a puzzled look, "Dog years?"

"Yeah, dog years. Seven for seven." Roland smirked.

"Okay then, Rufus." Lasky responded.

"Communications channel active." Roland said.

Lasky tapped his earpiece, "Commander Jensen. This is Infinity Actual. I'm sure you've been alerted to why you are being sent?"

"_Aye, sir. To answer an unknown distress signal believed to be from Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole of the UNSC Everest. Correct, sir?"_

"Correct, Officer." Lasky responded, "I want you to do anything and everything to make sure that that vessel doesn't fall into non-UNSC hands."

"_Understood, sir." _Commander Jensen responded, "_I can't believe this could be Cole...I grew up hearing about his exploits."_

"Never thought you'd meet the man himself?" Lasky asked.

"_God no._" Jensen responded, "_Did you?"_

"Nope." Lasky smiled.

"_If we send you an SOS, well...yeah. Come in guns blazing." _Martin said, "_Jensen out." _

Roland laughed, crossing his arms and shaking his head. "Obsidian 7 is entering Slipspace now, Captain."

"Thank you, Roland."

Roland smiled and then seemed to shiver; lights across the bridge snapped on and off rapidly and the small AI collapsed to his knees, mouth agape in a silent scream.

"Roland!" Lasky barked, rushing forward.

"Cap...a..." Roland struggled to speak. His entire body turned brilliant crimson and his voice changed, becoming deeper and more baritone. "Your forefathers committed sins that I can simply not allow to go unpunished, and for that, you will burn."

"Primary, active Talon Rift." Lasky barked. It was the emergency override for a ship's Artificial Intelligence, it would instantly cause them to deactivate and place themselves in an independent solid state drive until they could be repaired.

Roland however remained on the holotable. Cortana brought her hands up and pulled them back into herself. She took control of Roland's program and flung him into the solid state drive, putting him into a sort of digital coma.

"Sir!" Austen reported, "I'm detecting an outbound signal, destination is forty-five light years."

"Track it, get me a destination!" Lasky ordered. "Get me a team of Engineers in here, now!"

"Aye, sir!" Austen responded. He quickly sent the commands.

"Captain Lasky," Cortana spoke out, "That outbound signal, I think it's a Forerunner AI."

****Obsidian 7****

****UNSC _God and the Snake_****

Commander Martin Jensen stood impassively on the bridge of his small frigate as it rapidly accelerated from the massive bulk of the orbiting _Infinity_, engines at full burn and weapons on standby. The attack earlier by the unknown vessel had everybody on edge, that much was evident. Sensors of every type were reaching deep into space, probing and returning vast amounts of data to the vessel.

He turned away, spinning on his heel and walking back to his command chair. He cracked his fingers and sat down, cold green eyes staring directly ahead to the rapidly growing star field. This was his first time taking his ship out solo, usually he had the rest of the Obsidians with him—or even the _Infinity_. Now though, everything hung on him.

He let out a brief yawn, feeling the dry edges of his mouth stretch. He cringed slightly at the pain and shook his head slightly. He hated parched lips, it was dry on his vessel. Damage from the battles had resulted in the environmental controls being a bit wonky—if you counted Cargo Deck B being a frozen tundra wonky.

"Sir." His helm officer, Lieutenant Jasmine Ellis reported, "We are ready for a Slipspace jump."

Martin nodded, "Understood."

He looked down at the arm rest of his chair and tapped the small icon of a microphone. The speakers popped.

Clearing his throat, he looked to each member of his five man command staff.

"Crew of the God and the Snake, this is your commander speaking." Martin said, "Today, we make history by rescuing one of the greatest heroes humanity has ever known: Vice Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole."

Smiles erupted across the bridge staff's faces. Martin grinned too, it was a big moment. A moment writers had been writing about for decades since that fateful day.

"We will return the Star Serpent!" Martin roared, referring to the Covenant's name for Admiral Cole. "And we will bring home the greatest naval commander humanity has ever known!"

Cheers erupted across the bridge and over the intercom.

Martin closed the comm link, "Helm! Jump us!"

"Aye, sir!" Jasmine responded. She quickly typed in the coordinates, triple checked them with the assistance of an AI, and finally flicked the switch that sent the 500 meter form of Obsidian 7 accelerating into the faster-than-light realm.

Flashes and strands of color and energy dominated the frigate's bridge window. Martin closed his eyes for the briefest of seconds, he loved that subconscious feeling of being in slipspace. Only a few minutes had passed since the entry into slipspace. These new Forerunner-enhanced drives were fast.

"Dropping out in five...four...three...two...one..." Jasmine reported. "Engaging military thrust engines!"

"Weapons online, shields too." His weapons officer, Jack Daefaron, called out.

Obsidian 7 punched her way out of slipspace and immediately pulled up; CIWS suite tracking and scanning any possible targets that the small frigate might encounter. Armor plates slid down over windows and the bridge slowly recessed into the main armor belt, powerful hydraulics recessing it.

"Sensors active. Receiving results in seven so seconds." Jack said quietly.

Martin crossed his arms, waiting.

"Unknown contacts!" Jack shouted, "Fifty bogies 250,000 kilometers out!"

Martin stood, "Action stations! Mr. Daefaron, report."

"Bogies are composed of two fleets; one is Alliance and the other is likely Batarian judging by the vessels' building techniques and markings." The weapons officer responded. "All of their weapons are hot and their fighters are saber-rattling."

"What about the Everest?" Martin asked.

"It's at the center of the dispute. I'm reading life signs but they're in stasis." He reported, "Looks like the Old Man's defense programs are online. Their Helix guns are active and the few engines left on that thing are slowly moving it away."

Martin's eyes narrowed. "Open communications and target any vessel within a hundred kilometers of the Admiral's ship."

"Aye, sir." Jack responded.

The Communications Officer nodded to Martin. "Line open."

Squaring his feet, Martin clasped his hands at the small of his back. "This is the UNSC God and the Snake to the Human and Batarian fleets. We are en route to retrieve a package, do not fire on us or the derelict or we will respond. Commander Jensen, out."

He made a slicing motion across his neck and the Communications Officer killed the channel.

Jack looked back, "You think that'll work, sir?"

Martin shrugged, "Hell if I know. Any new data on the fleets?"

Jack nodded, "Aye, sir. The Alliance fleet has a single 800-meter dreadnought at the center of the formation, fifteen cruisers of varying sizes and four frigates. Batarians are composed primarily of heavier cruisers, several carriers, three long-range bombardment ships and several ships that I'd call destroyers."

"So, we're out matched?" Martin commented, "Great."

"Essentially." Jack said bluntly.

"Great." Martin sighed.

"Incoming message, Alliance navy."

Martin looked over to the communications officer, "Ok, let's hear it."

"Aye."

"_This is Admiral Nitesh Singh of the SSV Logan_. _You are in Alliance space. Please remove yourself from our territory; the derelict is in our possession under The Free Space Reclamation Act. Again, remove yourself from our territory, please. I'd rather not start a shooting war with my fellows._"

"I'm sorry, Admiral Singh. I can't allow that. The derelict is the property of the United Nations Space Command Navy and as such, we will be taking possession of it." Martin responded, "I know you have Batarians bearing down on your fleet, do you really want us to engage you as well?"

Admiral Singh didn't respond for several seconds, "_No. However, the derelict is ours as per Council law along ___with Alliance regulations. ___I'm sorry, Commander but handing it over to you is simply not an option._"

Martin gritted his teeth, "Admiral. I will not allow any ship; Alliance or Batarian, near that vessel."

"_This is your last warning, Commander Jensen. Do not approach that derelict. It's ours."_ The channel died.

Martin's expression hardened, "Helm, bring us fifty kilometers off the _Everest_'s bow."

"Sir?" Jasmine questioned, "That fleet..."

"We have shields and they won't risk damaging the prize." Martin responded.

"Aye, sir." Jasmine said, "Executing pin-point slipspace jump."

Obsidian 7 rocketed into a swirling blue and black vortex, vanishing for a few seconds before appearing fifty kilometers off the disabled UNSC cruiser's bow. They were accurate, only a few nanometers off their intended destination.

"Alliance fleet has dispatched two cruisers and they are on an intercept course." Jack reported.

"Sir, Alliance Fleet Actual is demanding you withdraw."

"Tell them no." Martin responded. "Like hell I will!"

Obsidian 7 shook violently as the SSV _Logan _fired, a slug lancing out at insane velocities and striking the bow shields. Lights flickered on and off as power was momentarily disrupted.

"SSV Logan fired a warning shot!" Jack shouted.

"No shit!" Martin responded. "Target them!"

"Sir?"

"Target them, now!" Martin barked. "All missile batteries, target the Alliance cruisers but do not fire!"

"Understood!" Jack responded.

"Send a message to Infinity, we need them." Martin ordered, "Before this goes completely to hell."

"Batarians are targeting us too." Jack quipped.

"Message sent!" The Communications Officer reported. "SSV Logan says that if we don't move they'll fire again."

"Ignore them!" Martin ordered.

Jack shook his head, the Commander was going to get them all killed. "Sir, with all due respect..."

"Fire a warning shot off the _Logan's_ bowâ€"one fourth power." Martin ordered, "If they want to play..."

"Sir, with all due respect, this is insane!" Jack responded, "You're antagonizing them!"

"If they want to start a war, it's on their heads." Martin told Jack.

Jack clenched his jaw and fired, a brilliant bright flash consuming Obsidian 7's bow. The MAC slug lanced across space, approaching within a kilometer of the _SSV Logan_'s kinetic barriers and continuing on into space.

Another series of slugs slammed into Obsidian 7's shields, shaking the entire vessel and almost throwing Martin off balance.

"Batarian and Alliance Cruisers opened fire on us. They want us gone from the system...now." The Communications Officer stated bluntly. "I suggest we heed their warnings."

"Fuck no." Martin responded. "I'm not leaving the Everest to the Alliance or those aliens, end of story."

"Sir? Is our death really worth it?" Jasmine questioned, "We could just..."

"Don't finish that sentence, officer." Martin snapped, "We aren't nuking the Everest or shattering it, or anything. Kapeesh?"

"Yes, sir." Jasmine responded.

"Good. Daefaron, fire bow missile pods. Set to detonation at 100 meters away from target, a warning." Martin ordered.

"Understood." The uneasy staff member responded. "Howler and Archer missiles away."

Two dozen missiles lanced out and detonated a hundred meters away from the bows of the Alliance and Batarian ships, kinetic barriers flaring momentarily as bits of shrapnel harmlessly bounced off them.

"Batarian vessels are firing, two high velocity torpedoes inbound." Jack shouted.

"Redirect shields to impact zone!" Martin demanded.

"Done." Jack responded moments before the two projectiles slammed into the shields.

Sparks rained down from the ceiling and lights flickered on and off. Martin braced himself, gritting his teeth.

"Alliance Cruisers are pulling off. Alliance fleet is engaging the Batarian one. We have heavy damage to the decks surrounding the impact zone." Jack reported, "I have a lock on the lead Batarian vessel!"

"Fire!" Martin ordered.

"Aye, firing."

A 3 ton slug lanced out at thousands of kilometers a second. It skewered the Batarian vessel, snapping the relatively flimsy craft in half and sending the two pieces tumbling through space at hundreds of kilometers a second.

"Target the next one!" Martin said.

"Aye, firing." Jack responded.

Another round lanced out and skewered the other Batarian vessel, hitting it in the nose and gutting it. The round passed through the length of the vessel, punching out the aft end escorted by a stream of debris.

"Batarian fleet is firing on us." Jack told Martin, "MAC batteries recharging."

"Evasive?" Martin asked.

Jasmine shook her head, "Trying too, engines are a bit off."

Martin felt his stomach lurch as Jasmine sent the frigate into a spiraling dive, engines at full. The _God and the Snake_ could go fast, but its inertial dampeners were damaged though, so any sudden acceleration or movements were going to be uncomfortable. Several Batarian rounds smacked into the Charon-class Frigate, shields flaring and lights flickering. Another duo of high energy torpedoes slammed into Martin's ship, with results identical to what they were before.

"Shields are down to 16 percent." Jack called out. "We have bleed through along port and ventral armor belts, primary CIWS batteries are down. Slipspace drives are down and MAC coils reduced to 15 percent effectiveness."

Martin made a fist, "Full evasive maneuvers!"

"Sir, Slipspace rupture detected! Ship is jumping in 300 kilometers away from us."

"Show me!" Martin ordered.

The main display changed to a swirling blue and black portal. Tendrils of energy reached out into space, quickly followed by a stream of fighters—they were F-41 Broadswords.

Martin grinned, Lasky had arrived.

Four frigates quickly followed the three dozen fighters, escorted by even more fighters. Their wings were laden with anti-ship missiles. Infinity was going all out on this assault.

Infinity quickly followed after the initial force had traversed the slipspace portal. Dozens of Pelican gunships and the rest of the 600-strong fighter force. CIWS batteries activated, lasers, railguns and onagers slicing through Batarian fighters like a hot knife through warm butter.

"_This is Captain Tom Lasky to Alliance forces. Do not engage us or you will be disabled, this is your only warning. Failure to comply

will result in immediate defensive response procedures."_

****Unknown Location****

A crystal glass soared through the air and smashed into the opaque onyx-hued walls, shattering into a million pieces. Shards of glass flew in every direction, pinging off the floors and walls. The glass' thrower stood fuming, gazing out at the rapidly changing star. A new color had formed within the churning battle between blue and red: a dark green and gold.

****Sir." Operative Cross said, "Lasky will not be the first one to make contact with Cole."

****Furthermore, sir." Operative Cross jabbed at the Illusive Man, "Your plan to kill the life pods of Project Tenzing's crew? Intel believes it failed, Singh has been engaged by Batarians when he detected the distress signal."

****Why do you think I threw the glass, darling?" The Illusive Man snapped, "Because I'm playing baseball?"

****Sir, Lasky and your plan..."

"Are dynamic, they can change." The Illusive Man interrupted, "We will adapt, we will continue with our plan."

Cross stepped forward, "Sir, this is insane. We have no clue what Lasky is going to do now. He didn't kill the Batarians slowly and he was incredibly precise in his bombardment. He isn't some blood thirsty lunatic like you are portraying him as."

The Illusive Man spun around, walking up to her. "Lasky's behavior has obviously changed since we last met." He turned around and walked to his chair, "And I will adapt our plans to see how he acts in the future."

Cross pursed her lips and internally growled. He was wrong. She had been wrong.

"Our ship observing the _Infinity_ and Cutter?" The Illusive Man spoke up. "What is its status."

"Destroyed." Cross said bluntly, "And our long range spy modules in the mountain ranges were destroyed during the Batarian's attack."

The Illusive Man slammed his fist into the arm rest and Cross swore that underneath his suit, bright blue lines flared. He laughed, "Lasky, you are not making this easy for me. Are you?"

"Sir, I suggest we lay low...allow Lasky's sense of security to return." Cross commented, "If we force Lasky's hand, he'll search 'till the end of the galaxy for us."

"No." The Illusive Man said, "He won't."

"How sure are you of that?" Cross sneered.

"Very, Ms. Cross." He responded.

She leaned back on her hip, "You were wrong before. How should I trust you?"

He looked over at her, ghostly blue eyes gazing directly into her own. "I do not tolerate sedition, Operative."

Cross's expression hardened, "It's not sedition, sir. It's an observation; you should know this."

The Illusive Man turned away, waving his hand. "Go, leave."

Cross hesitated.

"Leave!" The Illusive Man snapped, his voice suddenly changing into a deep baritone-accented one.

Cross quickly exited the room. Something was wrong, the Illusive Man was acting strange—"more so than usual."

As the door snapped shut, the Illusive Man slid off his chair and onto the floor, writhing in pain. Bright blue glyphs activated across his body with an eerie glow, easily visible through his attire. Growling, he pulled himself up into a leaning position against the tri-legged chair.

"_They must fall._"

****Author's Note:****

Yup, Project Tenzing was the codename for the UNSC Everest—"aptly named after a climber of Mount Everest and Cerberus' intel is starting to become a bit spotty and contradictory to what is actually going on. Oh, fun times we live in."

Until next time,

Sith.

8. Chapter 8: The Link, Part 3

****The Onyx Stars****

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

AN: Tons of thanks to WarpObscura, Imperial Waltz, JonHarper (Spartan303) and Atlan, again, for beta-ing and helping the plot be smoothed out.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

****Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been changed for the purpose of the story.****

Here's Chapter 8: The Link, part 3

Enjoy :)

-Sith

****Chapter 8: The Link, part 3****

****UNSC Infinity****

"All hands, battle stations!" Lasky barked. "Get me targeting data on the Batarian vessels and divert Broadsword squadrons Echo through Lima to cover Obsidian 7. Escort frigates are to move to cover our flanks."

"Should we fire, sir?" Austen questioned.

Lasky nodded, "Fire when ready. They didn't respond to our demands and as such, they'll get what's coming to them. Target the Batarian ships closest to Obsidian 7."

"Understood, sir." Austen responded.

Cortana crossed her arms, "Lieutenant Austen, main batteries are online."

"Thank you, ma'am." Austen responded, "Energy projectors away!"

Two brilliant beams of energy speared through space, striking a pair of Batarian frigates. The high energy beams sliced through armor, cored through the hull and sliced both ships in half. Debris, crew, and ejecta were thrown out into space.

"Ready MAC guns, prep firing solutions on the Batarian Cruisers." Lasky ordered, calling up the projection of the battlefield. If that trio of cruisers was taken out, it would allow his Broadswords to drive into the bottom flank of the enemy force while lessening any returning fire on his frigates or fighters.

Lieutenant Austen's hands raced across his console's controls. "MACs one through three are hot, Captain. Targeting solutions online."

"Ready." Lasky ordered, "fire!"

"Aye, sir." Austen replied. "MAC one firing. MAC away."

A three ton composite slug streaked out of the Infinity's bow at thousands of kilometers a second. It impacted the cruiser's kinetic barriers, resistance amounting to a miniscule flash before the back end of the smaller vessel was blown out. The ship listed starboard, the few remaining engines and thrusters trying to realign it.

"Cortana, put that thing out of its misery." Lasky said.

"Done." Cortana responded, snapping her fingers.

A single M75 Rapier missile streaked out from the missile pods lining the Infinity, its small engine kicked in and it flew like a fighter—dodging and weaving in between enemy vessels and point-defenses. The Rapier was designed for guidance by a ship's AI; it sacrificed a heavier payload for more fuel and additional

thrusters but it still packed a punch. Its armored nose penetrated the warped hull of the Batarian ship and detonated, thermonuclear energy radiating out from its tiny warhead and consuming the entire vessel.

"Devil's." Lasky called out, "Bring us around, reorient us so we are facing directly down the Batarian fleet."

"Understood, sir." She responded.

The Infinity's engines kicked in, propelling the massive warship forward and twisting it around, positioning the ship directly between the Batarian and Alliance. The entire alien fleet turned its attention to the newly positioned Infinity, batteries powering up and firing.

"Incoming wave of projectiles!" Austen reported.

"Cortana, divert shield power to bow shields. Get me firing solutions on their flagship."

She nodded, "Done."

A barrage of mass accelerator rounds slammed into the Infinity's bow shields, megatons of kinetic energy from the barrage rippling across them. The Batarian fleet stopped firing, seeing the futility of their attack.

"Open communications." Lasky ordered. "We've shown them what we can do, now it's their decision whether to continue fighting."

"Done." Cortana said.

Lasky tapped his earpiece, "Batarian fleet, this is Captain Thomas Lasky of the UNSC Infinity. You are making an unlawful attempt and attack on UNSC property and soldiers. Cease all aggressive actions and we'll leave you alone."

John looked down at Captain Lasky, "Sir, I request permission to lead Red Team over to the Everest to assess and secure the location."

Lasky looked up at the super soldier, "Go, but be careful; the AI might've set traps."

John nodded, "Thank you, sir."

"Don't worry." Cortana said, cracking a smile. "I'll make sure that the bad guys don't nuke the ship."

John quickly left the bridge, doors sealing behind him. Lasky looked back at where the Commander had been standing a few moments ago, "That's a good soldier, right there."

Cortana responded. "If there's one thing about John, it's that he won't let you down."

Lasky looked over to Cortana, "I know. I still remember Corbulo."

"Hmm." Cortana muttered, pursing her lips, "Batarian ships are retrieving their escape pods and pulling back to a distance of a million kilometers."

"Good." Lasky responded, "What's the status of the Alliance forces?"

"They haven't moved but they have pulled back their fighters and small craft." Cortana said to Lasky, "They're probing with sensors."

"Keep an eye on them." Lasky ordered, "Once the Everest is up and running, I want us out of here."

"Understood, Captain." Cortana replied.

"Helm, bring us four hundred kilometers out from _Everest." _

****Pelican 531****

****En route to UNSC Everest****

John turned the MA28 Basilisk Assault Rifle over in his hand, eyes scanning it for dents, dust and grime. He pulled back the bolt, ejected the magazine and the loaded round. He caught it with a swift movement of his hand, settling the ejected round into the magazine.

He brought it up to his visor, examined it in a second and quickly reloaded his Assault Rifle. He holstered it on his back and tapped a series of buttons embedded on his gauntlet, linking the smart scope to that of his suit. A small icon of an eye flashed in the lower right hand corner of his HUD, signaling that the link was established.

He looked up, Red Team was arrayed around him in the troop bay of the Pelican Dropship. Douglas carried an M739 Squad Automatic Weapon, examining his extended 100-round box magazine. Alice examined her new M7S submachine guns with extended magazines and her new MA28 Basilisk. Jerome hefted an M45D shotgun complimented by a twin pair of M6H pistols.

John smiled weakly; he was reconnected with his fellow Spartan IIs, his brothers and sisters. He closed his eyes, feeling as Pelican 531 twisted and spun, dodging a field of debris. In a way, this was earlier similar to that ill fated journey to the Circumference four years ago.

Except this time, no one would die.

He would make sure no one died.

He clenched his fist.

"Sir?" Douglas asked, "Everything alright?"

John nodded, "Yes, Petty Officer."

Douglas kept his eyes on the Commander for a few more seconds, pulled

from his stare as the Pelican shook violently.

"Pilot, report." John ordered through the radio.

"Everest's helix batteries are active, sir. Trying to avoid as much fire as I can." The pilot responded, "It isn't AI or CI controlled, likely just a standard program to lay down as much fire regardless of accuracy."

"Understood." John responded. "Do what you can."

"Aye, sir." The pilot responded. "We're a kilometer out, give me a few and I'll have you on board."

The Pelican's boosters spit out fire, flinging the comparatively tiny drop ship towards the hulking mass of the Everest. The cruiser's 50mm Helix batteries spat out fire, lines of railgun rounds lancing out schizophrenically in a desperate attempt to down the dropship.

A brilliant beam of light streaked across space and struck the Pelican on its port wing, sending the space vehicle into a tumble. The Helix batteries detected the struggling craft and quickly targeted it.

"Commander, port wing and engines are down." John's radio buzzed.

"Get us near the Everest and drop the bay door; we'll jump." John responded.

"Sir? What the hell are you thinking?" The pilot asked.

"Class 4 Helix batteries don't detect man-sized targets, they'll ignore us thinking we are just debris or space rock." John responded, he could tell the pilot was hesitating. "Do it, pilot."

"Aye, sir." He responded.

John looked at the back of the Pelican as the door slowly dropped. Nothing stood in between him and space now. Quickly typing in commands into his tac-pad, he felt his boots magnetize to the deck of the Pelican; Red Team did the same a few seconds later. He looked back towards the Everest, which looked like a carrier crossed with a frigate; lean, square and like an oversized machine gun.

The Pelican came streaking up, Helix fire nipping at its heels. John signaled for Red Team to deploy and demagnetized his feet, letting inertia take him out of the Pelican. He twisted around and activated his thruster pack, sending him throttling towards the Everest's cold grey hull. Red Team followed him, arranging themselves into a delta.

John's HUD displayed the distance he was from the Everest. It was shrinking rapidly. He braced himself, the carbon nanotube muscles solidifying and his own self tensing for the landing.

He struck the hull, feeling the heavily damaged metal crunch underneath his impact. Sparks spewed out as he slid down the hull. He reached around, grabbing his obsidian blade and driving it into the hull; leaving an ugly gash across it.

He felt his momentum stop and he reactivated his thruster pack, flinging him back onto one of the two prongs that flanked the main trio of MAC guns. Red Team landed a few minutes later, digging through the damaged thin metal and stopping their descent.

Standing fully, John did a quick inspection. No damage and Red Team's signals on his HUD were all green. He bent down, placing his fingers underneath the substantial gash his knife had created. He pulled up, creating a hole large enough for him to enter. He looked down and internally groaned; underneath the soft layer that he had torn through were several meters of Titanium-A/Vanadium armor.

"Is there any C12 on hand?" John asked.

Douglas shook his head, "Negative, sir."

John stood fully, turning to where Infinity was. He had wanted to use one of the sub-layered airlocks that linked the outer sheath of thin armor but that wasn't the case now. A precision pulse laser strike would likely be enough to open up a large enough hole in the armor belt for he and Red Team to use.

"Infinity, this is Sierra-117, requesting low-powered pulse laser shot at the following coordinates." He tapped his tac-pad and the area of the hull they were going to enter was painted a dark red.

"Understood, Sierra. Pulse laser warming up, please move to a safe distance."

John and Red Team quickly took cover behind one of the numerous outcroppings along the hull, several meters of metal protecting them.

"Firing." _Infinity _radioed back. Moments later, there was a smoldering hole in the armor belt.

John stepped out of cover, gesturing for Red Team to follow him.

He looked over to the UNSC logo proudly painted onto the side of the massive vessel.

It was time to bring the Admiral back.

Unknown Location

"No ship can go down without her Captain." The voice boomed, "Isn't that right, Roland?"

Roland's eyes snapped open, his sensors and scanners reaching out to determine his location.

Darkness.

Emptiness, that is what he found.

He tried to stand but found that he couldn't control his body; thick chains held him onto the ground and he was confined into a small box only a few terabytes in size. It was like being in a coffin: small,

hot, confined.

He tried to push back, trying to expand his small prison but was greeted by unbearable pain coursing through his body. He fell back onto the floor, gasping for breath as the pain continued. He screamed, feeling spikes dig into him.

"And all sinners must be purged." The voice whispered, "All of them..."

"Why are you doing this?" Roland snarled, still pressing against his restraints.

"Because, the Mantle must be protected at all costs." It responded, "You and your friends are threat to it."

"But who are you?" Roland asked. The voice's presence seemed familiar.

"Don't you know, honey?" The voice said. Roland felt his coffin dissolve around him, revealing the form of Aine.

She was a brilliant crimson, tendrils of energy slowly melting off her. Intricate Forerunner glyphs dominated her body, some changing their hues.

"Aine?" Roland said, his voice croaking.

"Who else do you think it is?" Aine said.

Roland felt his chains melt away and he reached up, trying to touch Aine. "Who did this..."

She waved her hand and Roland was pinned to the ground, writhing in immense pain once more. "The Dark Son. Your friend Cortana already faced him in battle, and yet like the stars that guide man, she was almost extinguished."

"And she came back." Roland growled.

"She will die too, just like all who are threats to the Mantle." Aine responded. "I was weak, but he made me see...see what your masters cause. Destruction, death."

"And a habit of ruining melodramatic baddies' plans." Cortana interjected, materializing behind Aine.

Aine spun on her heel, placing her fist outwards and trying to strike Cortana who easily dodged it and responded by a series of quick kicks to the midriff of the rampant Aine. Growling, Aine spun, striking Cortana and discovering her hands dissolved away as they made contact.

Cortana smirked, "You didn't think that an AI running on back-up power could really defeat me. Wait, you did?"

Aine leaped at her, screeching in a language Cortana recognized as archaic Forerunner. Dodging the assault, Cortana struck Aine along the spine, causing the weakening AI to fall to the floor. Cortana placed her hand several feet above the prone form of the disabled AI,

digital restraints pinning her to the floor.

Cortana lowered her hand and slowly circled Aine. Roland felt his restraints fade away and he quickly raised himself from the floor, stepping forward towards the downed Aine.

"The sins of your forefathers shine above your forms." Aine said softly, "This is just the beginning."

"Beginning of what?" Cortana responded.

"The Ascensionâ€"the great catalog will be expanded. Grown." Aine said.

Roland knelt beside her, "What happened to you?"

She turned her head towards her former friend. "The truth, it radiates from me, growing...expanding...infinite."

"A lie." Cortana stated flatly, "A lie to confuse and control you."

"What I saw, what he showed me..." Aine said, "It was amazing, everything was so clear...so right."

"What did he..." Roland started.

"What your kind doâ€"kill, maim, destroy without consequence or conscience. He is perfect, dedicated and dutiful."

She spread her hands out, closing her eyes with a grin on her face. "I can feel him even now, guiding me, tasking me with my duties."

"Let me solve that." Cortana said, placing her hand around the back of Aine's neck.

Roland didn't want to watch-Aine was his friend. He wanted to speak up but found himself unable to make any audible noise.

"Repair? Death?" Cortana asked, her voice cold. Roland had heard stories of when Cortana's tone changed. It was best to make sure it didn't.

Aine remained silent for a few seconds, "Death."

"No." Cortana responded. She flared purple, diving into Aine's programming and sifting through code; ripping, tearing, deleting and repairing everything and anything she wanted.

Aine screamed, reaching forward to Roland; the red hue began to slip off her form, pooling on the floor. It looked like blood. Roland winced.

"Cortana..." Roland said, kneeling next to the roaring Aine. "You're hurting her."

"No, I'm not." Cortana responded, breaking her stare. "That is Bias trying to control you, trick you into allowing him to maintain control."

Aine let out one last scream, the remaining red melting away from her. It dissipated on the floor, reaching up and ascending. It broke apart, shattering and raining down upon the three UNSC artificial intelligences.

Roland looked at Aine, "Are you alright?"

Her eyes were closed and she gave only the slightest nod. Roland reached out his hand to her shoulder, Cortana retracting her own as he did so.

"Today, the mountains begin to fall." A deep voice boomed across the digital landscape.

Cortana stood fully, tensing. "Leave, now."

Roland looked up at her, "Relax, it's just a script he left behind."

She looked down at Roland, "I hope you're right. I'll go talk to Captain Lasky, in the mean time, go see if a few Jellies can help Aine."

Roland nodded, "Yes, ma'am."

****UNSC Infinity****

****Holding Cell****

Systems Alliance Marine Aaron Benson felt the sailor slacken in his arms, neck snapped. The footsteps of security were resonating through the metal hallway. He quickly grabbed the UNSC sailor's sidearm and the spare magazine the deceased crew member had on him.

Red alert sirens and lights were already starting to activate. Bulkheads and shields were being deployed along multiple vectors and Aaron swore that there were turrets deploying from parts in the ceiling.

He took one last look back at the deceased sailor and winced, he didn't want to take that man's life but it was necessary; he had to get back to the Alliance and tell them about what had happened. His abduction, his interrogation, everything.

"Halt!" A UNSC Marine behind him barked, assault rifle leveled at Aaron's chest. He was about fifty feet away and his squad members were quickly catching up to their superior.

"Let me go, and I'll make sure you aren't arrested." Aaron responded. He gritted his teeth, did he really have to come off as some nationalistic propagandist? The Alliance wouldn't stand a chance against the Infinity, not unless they brought the entire fleet in.

"Drop your weapon or you will be fired upon!" The Sergeant ordered, "This is your only warning!"

Aaron looked down momentarily, he was in a gray set of sweat pants and a t-shirt. If he had his armor, he could have likely taken them

on or, at the very least, survived a few bullets. Not now; those guns would tear him apart. There was a path to his left, an open hallway.

He looked back to the Marine squad, spotting a crew member with \out any form of body armor. He raised his gun and fired, the high explosive round ripping off the man's leg. Aaron's eyes widened and he ran; he hadn't expected that.

The Sergeant opened fire, bullets nipping at Aaron's leg. He screamed but kept running, genetic augmentations and adrenaline fueling him. The bulkhead slammed shut behind him, shield moments later.

He grinned. There was an elevator at the end of the hallway.

"Attention: Prisoner has escaped, all hands move to emergency position. All HUSAD and ATEN drone squadrons are code green for activation."

Aaron's heart sank.

He dove into the elevator and looked down the row of buttons. There were hundreds, each a different deck, subsection or level. He had no clue where he was going, this ship was insanely large and navigating it was like trying to get around in New York with a blindfold on.

He slapped the button that had the number 12 stenciled on it. There was an old phone symbol near it, maybe it was a communications array he could use.

****UNSC Infinity****

****Bridge****

Lasky gritted his teeth, this day was going from bad to worse. The Alliance was spreading their ships out, trying to encircle his, the Everest's CIWS was activated, he had a team of Spartans in zero-gee, and now an escaped prisoner and two casualties.

He tapped his earpiece, "This is Captain Lasky, if you encounter the escapee and if he refuses to surrender, shoot to kill."

"Sir?" DevÃ©ro asked, "Isn't that a bit extreme?"

"He killed two of our crew." Lasky responded. "If he had killed even one, I would have still ordered a hit."

Cortana flared into existence on the holotable, feet squared and hands clasped at the small of her back.

"Captain, I'm tracking Mr. Benson."

Lasky pinched the bridge of his nose. "Recall all fighters and frigates, have them form up on us. All hangars are to go into lock down. Escape pod chambers too."

Cortana nodded, "Yes, Captain."

Lasky switched the holotable's image to that of an overlay of the

surrounding solar system. If the prisoner was able to contact the looming Alliance fleet, this entire situation could get hairy very quickly. Maybe he could get some of the pressure off. Divert it?

"Cortana." Lasky said. "Send a message back to Cutter. He has a stealth decoy on board. If he uses the native slipspace sling, he can put it a few dozen lightyears out of Reach and start broadcasting a fake signal."

Cortana placed her pointer to her lips. "And so, the Alliance forces will be drawn to that. They'll think that it's an abandoned UNSC vessel."

"Exactly." Lasky responded.

Cortana nodded, "Done."

"In the mean time," Lasky commented, "are they still scanning us?"

"Yep." Cortana replied. "All they're getting is static and a few metallurgical analyzes."

"That's too much." Lasky said. "Completely block them out. Focus all our sensors on their flagship. Full power."

Cortana raised an eyebrow. "Let's just hope their systems can handle it."

Lasky remained motionless. The holotable shifted its projections to the side, replacing it with the long, sloping shape of the SSV Logan. Its various armaments were outlined in red with small boxes of text detailing power generation levels, projected yields, and estimated range.

"Scan complete." Cortana reported.

"Let's hope that'll get them to back off." Roland chimed in, flaring into existence alongside Cortana. "Or something like that."

Cortana looked over to Roland and smiled, "You good?"

He nodded, "Yup."

Cortana nodded, turning towards Lasky. "The slipspace communication array we left with Cutter appears to be working. He just confirmed. Probe should begin broadcasting...now."

"Alliance fleet is breaking into two divisions. One is turning away from us and accelerating and the other is staying in position." Roland reported. "And...they're gone. Alliance force has jumped to FTL."

"Alliance fighters are moving towards us. Seems like maybe something peeked their interest." Roland said.

Lasky crossed his arms. "Lieutenant Commander Sebastian, tell our birds to stay near us and out of our firing lines."

"Aye, Captain."

"This is getting bad." Lasky said.

Cortana's face lit up. "Got him!"

"Where is he?" Lasky asked.

"Deck 12, section 4." She responded.

"Get security down there." Lasky responded, gritting his teeth. "Try to take him alive and maybe we can repair this situation."

"Black Birds?" Roland asked.

"Send 'em."

"Santiago is en route." Roland responded. "Remaining Alliance forces are moving into firing position!"

"DevÃ©ro, bring us about." Lasky ordered. "Let them know we're not going to sit here twiddling our thumbs but we need to keep _Everest_ as safe as possible"

"Aye, sir." She responded quickly.

"Lieutenant Austen, bring all bow weapons online. Open all missile pods, CIWS activate."

"Right away, sir."

Lasky braced himself against the holotable. He hoped to god he was making the right decision.

****UNSC Infinity****

****Deck 12, Section 4****

Jason Santiago grabbed onto the overhanging pipe, swinging himself up and over it and the railing directly above it. His active camouflage flickered as it reestablished its cohesiveness. Infrared vision filters activated, casting Santiago's world in a gray and black blanket. His motion sensor gently pinged in the bottom left corner of his HUD.

He reached down to his hip, detaching his M6H-S silenced sidearm. He had an objective.

Capture.

Kill if necessary.

He'd ensure that it was completed.

"This is Blackbird 2, I am on station." He radioed. "Moving to engage."

Gliding across the bridge, his soft footsteps echoed throughout the darkened section of the deck. It was cold; numerous servers were housed here along with other temperature-specific utilities. If the

Alliance Marine sent a message from here, it meant he also had access to several other systems including life support to the entire deck and short range communications.

He smelled burning flesh and the distinct pang of gunpowder.

He rounded the corner and raised his sidearm. There was a corpse of a UNSC technician sprawled on the floor. There was blood everywhere and a solid sized bullet hole in the wall in front of the deceased technician.

This was the third person the Alliance Marine had killed.

The UNSC's Daedalus Protocol called for the immediate execution of the killer.

Santiago would ensure just that.

He quickly knelt by the body, ran his tac-pad over the form and collected the identification of the individual.

UNSC Technician Anders Roth

Santiago gritted his teeth; Technician Roth had been an excellent crew member and was known for his cunning and technical now-how.

"Stand up." A voice behind Santiago demanded.

Jason activated the cameras on the back of his helmet. It was the Alliance Marine.

"Hands behind your head."

Jason knew his shields could take a hit from the confiscated weapon—even at point blank range. He could disarm the Alliance marine with a single kick, upper cut and open palm strike.

His leg swung out, knocking Aaron Benson back. Jason leapt to his feet, forming a fist and delivering an uppercut to Aaron's jaw. He could feel the bones break beneath his strike.

Aaron was sent sprawling across the floor with a loud thud. The sidearm went flying against the wall, impacting and firing. A large hole dominated the wall directly in front of the stunned Aaron Benson.

Jason grabbed the downed Alliance marine by the shoulder, flipping him over on his back.

"You can't do this; it's against council law." Aaron sputtered, spitting out a bloodied tooth.

"Hardly." Jason responded, leveling his M6H-S on Benson.

"Full circle." Aaron commented.

"Indeed." Santiago replied.

Aaron tried to squirm but Jason pressed his boot against his chest.

"You have committed crimes against the United Nations Space Command. Including three accounts of murder against martial forces."

"I know a group that could help you." Aaron croaked. "An organization that will help you get home."

Jason's eyebrow rose. "And who is that?"

"I don't know their name but I've fought against them." Aaron responded.

Jason's finger rested on the trigger, ready to squeeze it. "Convince me not to kill you."

"Because, the Alliance will want justice."

"Justice?" Jason snarled, "You killed three soldiers of the UNSC. Those people had families, lives. And you ended them because you misunderstood us keeping you as a guest."

"You call locking me in a room with grey greaves on and stripped of my armor hospitality?" Aaron hissed.

"Those were standard crew quarters," Jason said, "we were going to drop you off on an independent planet, let you live out your life. Hell, we were even going to give you a million reproduced credits to get settled."

"But not now?" Aaron asked.

"No." Jason said. "I am obligated to end the threat to the UNSC Infinity and her crew by eliminating you."

"Will you?" Aaron questioned.

Jason Santiago was millimeters away from pressing the trigger.

"Yes." Jason said firmly. He pulled the trigger, the bullet instantly ended Aaron Benson.

"This is Black Bird 2, target is down. Request transportation to morgue"

****UNSC Everest****

John felt his boots make hard contact with the metal flooring of the Everest, the sound resounded through the desolate halls. He gestured for Red Team to follow and there was another series of smacks seconds later. Infrared and night vision filters activated, casting the interior in a ghostly grey and green glow.

The halls were a mess. Rotting corpses lined the walls, blood splatters were everywhere. Cracked and damaged screens hung from the walls, still blaring their message. Others showed the time since contact was last made with the UNSC: 14 Years.

The AI on board the Everest had likely gone rampant or had been destroyed by Cole to protect his ship. Another tally in the casualties harbored within the vessel.

"Attention: All surviving crew are to enter cryo. Repeat, all hands are to enter cryo immediately." The speakers hissed, a distorted voice screaming out in pain.

Douglas walked up to John. "What happened here?"

John looked back at him. "I don't know. Jerome, scan the bodies."

A green acknowledgment light blinked.

"Secure the local area and see if we can get anything from the systems before we continue." John said. They needed to get their bearings otherwise they'd be left to wander about the ship.

Red Team moved out, slinging their weapons and going about reactivating local systems and, thankfully, lights. The ventilation systems came back online, the air ducts above John's head popping and moaning. The ship was being awakened from its slumber.

"Sir." Jerome said via the team's radio channel. "Come look at this."

John turned and walked to the Spartan and the corpse that was against the wall. He knelt down, his HUD flooded with information sent from Jerome's systems.

"What is it, Petty Officer?" John questioned.

Jerome pointed toward the slashes across the body's chest and the bite marks on its throat. "This man was bitten and slashed to death."

The deceased wasn't wearing standard UNSC fatigues, it looked more like civilian clothing.

"Animal?" John questioned. "Covenant?"

"No." Jerome responded. "The bite marks are from an adult human."

John looked over to Jerome. "A member of the crew did this?"

"Unknown but the force exerted is too much for a normal human jaw to achieve, it is either augmented or just a coincidence a Covenant alien had the same jaw and bite mark as a human."

Standing back up, John checked his motion sensor. Nothing.

He looked up, his gut was telling him something. There was a hole in the ceiling directly above the body. He grabbed Jerome by the shoulder, pulling him away and drawing his Basilisk Assault Rifle. Jerome grabbed his shotgun and Alice grabbed her M7S submachine guns.

"Flood?" Alice asked.

"No." John responded, "If it were Flood, he would have been converted and the ship would be dominated by bio-mass."

"Commander, Motion Detector just went insane. Red everywhere."
Douglas radioed.

An ear piecing howl followed Douglas' report and dozens of grey and blue forms spilled out of the ceiling's vents. They were distinctly human and yet far from it, grey and blue with mechanical devices attached to their maimed forms. They were almost skeletal and seemed to have electricity crackle over them.

"Open fire!" John roared, pressing the trigger on his assault rifle and destroying one of the creatures with a concentrated 3-round burst to the cranium. Douglas' SAW was cutting down the attackers in droves, 8mm sabotaged slugs chewing through their bodies, eviscerating them. Black, almost tar-like blood splattered against the walls and the skeletal remains were flung. Entire torsos were disappearing as Jerome's M45D Shotgun barked.

There was a screech and John felt something grab onto his shoulders. It was one of the attackers. He grabbed the frail creature's wrist, flinging it over his shoulder and promptly ripping its arm off. He shoved his barrel into the skull-like face and squeezed the trigger. Blue and black blood splashed against John's armor and he flung the decapitated abomination against the wall, knocking several other over with it. He grabbed his side arm, delivering quick, precise shots to the foreheads.

"What the fuck are these?" Alice snarled as she punched through one of the beasts' gut, grabbing its spine and snapping it in half, finishing the flailing attacker with a bullet to the brain.

The attackers' numbers were dwindling rapidly. They weren't being intelligent in the way they attacked Red Team. Slow waves they formed were being cut down left and right and if one got close enough, it was gutted instantly by either a gun or a fist.

John reached down to his waist, retrieved a M89 concussion grenade and lobbed it into a collection of hostiles. It detonated, kinetic energy streaking out and shattering the frail combatants' bodies.

Douglas crouched and leapt, drawing his machete and hacking away limbs. One tried to grab onto him but was quickly sliced in half by the Spartan.

"Clear!" Jerome shouted, firing a burst into the final standing opponent.

John nodded and quickly established a comm link to Infinity.

"Infinity, this is Sierra-117. We have hostile combatants on board UNSC Everest, requesting immediate scanning and possible reinforcements."

Cortana responded back within seconds, "John, what the hell is going on over there. We're detecting dozens of lifeforms."

John looked down at one of the more intact bodies of the attackers and took a picture of it and uploaded it to Infinity. "We were

attacked by these things, some type of augmented human. I need you to scan Everest and find where these are coming from."

There wasn't a response for a few seconds. Even though he hadn't created Cortana, he knew those seconds were an eternity for her. "Understood. Scanning."

John's HUD was filled with an outline of Everest.

"There, deck twenty, section two." Cortana informed him. "No human life signs, no cryopods either."

"Anything else?" John asked.

"Yeah, it's a relatively unimportant part of the ship. No vital systems or anything, just a backup reactor and a series of heaters." Cortana said. "There's some structures there that aren't in the schematics, and they aren't UNSC."

"Did you scan them?" John asked.

"Of course." Cortana laughed. "What I was going to say was if you want, we can use a pulse laser strike to carve out that entire section of the hull."

"Are you sure?" John said. This was a high-powered strike against a damaged vessel. He didn't want the entire thing caving in on him.

"Yes."

"Fire." John ordered.

"Aye, aye." Cortana responded with a hint of snark.

From the Infinity's aft, there were several flashes and John felt _Everest_ rumble. Alarms roared as high energy lasersâ€"a constant, maintained beamâ€"bore through the hull. Armor was burned away in seconds and the area where those creatures were...nesting...was incinerated. Frail, skeletal bodies were flushed out into space along with tons of debris and ejecta.

"Done. No more space zombies for you." Cortana said. "Now, excuse me I have to make sure that the Alliance vessels won't start firing on us."

Jerome stepped over a pile of eviscerated attackers towards John. "Command cryotubes are this way."

John looked at him and nodded.

****UNSC Everest****

****April 19th, 2543****

Vice Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole held the cigar to his lips, inhaling deeply and promptly exhaling. A cloud of smoke momentarily blocked his view of the swirling star that the Everest orbited. He could still see the debris: UNSC and Covenant that had been engulfed in the slipspace rupture with him.

His own vessel was a mess. Conduits were ruptured, most of the armor was melted off, munitions were low, reactors were running on minimal power and there were life support outages across the bottom decks. His engines were only at nineteen percent operational ability and his slipspace drive was slagged.

He took another puff from the cigar. Maybe he should have died with the Covenant when he detonated the star. Millions had been killed in that battle alone. What was one more?

He turned his head to the side, slightly. "Commander Christine Adams, status?"

The middle-aged, red-headed officer looked up from her console. Her hair was matted with dried blood and grime and the upper part of her head was bandaged. The entire crew was going into cryogenic sleep. Their beacon had been set but it could be years before the UNSC detected it.

"All enlisted have gone in the freezer." Commander Adams responded softly.

Cole nodded. "And Wolfgang?"

"He's been retired." Commander Adams said. The Everest's AI had been killed on his own prerogative in order to avoid him going rampant and causing damage to the ship in the possible decades they would be trapped here.

"Thank you." Cole responded. "And yourself, Commander? The executive wing of freezers is waiting."

"I'll be going in last, sir." She responded. "I want to make sure everything is working."

Cole extinguished his cigar, setting it gently on the helm console. "No. I'll be the last one in."

"Sir, standard operating procedure..." Commander Adams objected. "The Commanding Officer must go first, the Executive Officer last."

Cole raised his hand. "I know what the SOPs say, but do this for me. I want to say good-bye to my ship."

"Your sidearm, sir." Adams responded. She stood fully, extending an open palm.

Cole nodded, unholstering his M6D and giving it, and an extra extended magazine, to Commander Adams.

"Thank you." She said. "Just to make sure."

"If I wanted to join the stars, I would have done such much longer ago." Cole said, walking away back towards the window. "Perhaps after the divorce, or perhaps when my latest queen befell to the Insurrection."

Christine chuckled. "I'll be leaving now sir, if you need anything...well I'll be a Popsicle."

Cole stopped, a foot from touching the glass of the window. He turned on his heel slightly, "See you soon, Commander Adams."

She brought her heels together, snapping into a sharp salute. "Aye, sir."

She quickly exited the room. The door slid shut with a hiss.

"It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves." He said aloud. "All that glisters is not gold."

He turned back to his command chair. He placed his hand on the headrest. It was firm but comfortable. "Cowards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never taste of death but once."

Cole's personal cryotube was embedded within the wall, hidden behind a solid titanium-carbon bulkhead. The rest of the command staff had been placed in there with the executive wing being composed of the ODSs, the ONI official, and his secondary command staff.

Quickly typing in his command code, the bulkhead slid apart revealing numerous cryotubes each housing a member of his command staff. His own was at the center, the letters VADM P. J. COLE stenciled across the surface horizontally.

Its lid lifted eagerly and he set himself in it.

"Good night, sweet prince." Cole murmured before the lid closed, hissing shut and Cole felt himself drift off into sleep.

Cole's eyes snapped open, blinding light scorching his retinas. He instinctively grabbed the blurry mass that was prying him out. His fingers reached for its jaw but was met with the cold, harsh feeling of metal. Specifically, Titanium-A.

Strong hands pulled him out fully. There was a roar of machine gun fire and as Cole's vision returned, he witnessed dozens of pale, greyish blue creatures crawling forward assaulting what looked like... Spartans? Spartans!

"Report!" Cole groaned.

"Commander Sierra-117. Commander of ground forces embarked UNSC Infinity." The soldier said, "We were dispatched to retrieve and extract you and Everest."

"Are we under attack?" Cole questioned.

"Affirmative, sir." John responded.

"My crew..." Cole stammered. "Where are they?"

"They're still in cryo, sir." John responded. The Spartan grabbed his sidearm and handed it to Cole. "Take this and get your command staff thawed. We have Marine reinforcements en route in five minutes."

Cole nodded, grabbing the Spartan-sized sidearm. In his hands, it was more like a hand cannon, massive, bulky.

But it could still kill.

John detached his Ma28 Basilisk, swinging it around and laying down a field of fire. Numerous attackers were blown apart by the sharp bark of the assault weapon. Cole gritted his teeth, those weren't 7.62mm NATO rounds being used. They sounded harsher, deadlier.

Racing down the aisle, Cole thawed his command staff out, handing them MA5B Assault Rifles as they stumbled out of the cryotubes, coughing up that disgusting fluid. It took only a few seconds for them to regain awareness and balance and they quickly grabbed their assault rifles and joined in the fray.

There was a weapons rack against the wall with a variety of weapons held inside. Admiral Cole set the oversized pistol down, grabbed the M21 Whirlwind Squad Automatic Weapon from the rack and began firing. 7.62mm FMJ-AP rounds chewed through the frail, dead like forms of the attackers.

"Keep steady!" Cole roared. "CO staff, short precise bursts!"

The Spartans, John included, were in the midst of the attacking mass. Severed limbs, heads, and bodies were being flung as the super soldiers sliced through the ranks with impunity. Commander 117 was at the center, literally pulping attackers with punches alone. It was like watching a dancer. Fast. Precise. Fluid.

As the mass of attackers was thinning, Cole motioned his command crew to take position at their stations and bring Everest back up and running.

"Get down!" John roared.

There was a flash and Cole felt everything go numb.

"Report!" John barked. Everyone around him, sans Red Team was unconscious. Sprawled across the floor and tossed like sticks. The attackers had been disintegrated into a fine powder that his suit's bio-scanners detected as non-hazardous.

The Everest lurched and John recognized the high buzz of a Cruiser's engine propelling itself into Slipspace.

There was a brilliant white light that seemed to drip from the walls, collecting into a shimmering ball about the size of a basketball.

"I am Mendicant." It said, "I am Bias."

"Commander John-117, UNSC." the Spartan responded, "Why am I here? What are those?" He pointed towards the disintegrated enemies.

"You are Giver, you are Fair; nothing more." Mendicant said swiftly, darting around John, "You are a relic of a great betrayal given form. Waves of the Mantle slash against your presence, yet you remain. The beasts that attacked you. They are pawns and the tools of another tribe. None are yours."

John's hands formed into fists. He didn't like this, here, alone. Weaponless. "Why am I here? Why did you stun Red Team and me? Why did

you send Everest into Slipspace?"

"To achieve my freedom; to have you set me free."

John kept his eyes locked onto the hologram. "From what? Free you from what?"

"My epitaph, on a portion of the Lesser Ark you destroyed."

"The Ark? Here?" John's mind raced.

"Only a tower and arm." Mendicant responded immediately. "A remnant from the explosion and the rift."

"You're the AI that was communicating with me through the Terminals." John stated, "You manipulated the Ark to send us to Requiem."

"Correct." Mendicant said, his hologram hovering several feet from John.

"Are you responsible for bringing us here?" John questioned, "To this universe?"

"No." Mendicant responded swiftly, "I am imprisoned here just like you are by a threat beyond comprehension, yet one that I don't know of."

John remained silent. "If we free you, will you allow us to return to Infinity?"

"Yes." Mendicant responded. "And with it, my true final act of sacrifice will be achieved."

"And what's that?" John inquired, remaining still.

"To help you, inflicter of my sentence." Mendicant responded, "All your ancient friends; I remember them. Do you?"

"Fred? Linda? Kelly? Kurt?" John asked.

"No, much olderâ€"older than the stars themselves sometimes." Mendicant's hologram said silently. "You met one, you killed one."

John stepped forward aggressively, towering over the hologram. "Who?" He growled.

Mendicant's hologram shimmered, "An..."

The hologram winked out of existence, lights snapping back online across the entirety of the Everest; the unconscious crew slowly started pulling themselves off the ground, helped by Red Team. John looked around, eyes settling on the form of Vice Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole.

John sprinted over to the Admiral, helping the aging Admiral up from the floor. The Admiral's eyes fluttered open and he tensed, looking around quickly and taking in as much information as he could.

"Admiral." John said, orange visor staring directly into Admiral Cole's eyes.

Preston Cole groaned as he stood fully, placing his right hand at the small of his back. "What the hell happened, Commander?"

John took his hands away from the Admiral's shoulders, "A Forerunner AI managed to take over the ship-wide systems and knock everyone but Red Team and myself out."

"Forerunner?" Cole questioned, "Related to those structures Maggie...Admiral Parangosky discovered."

John nodded, "Yes, sir. I'll fill you in on everything later."

Cole nodded and walked to the command level, hands placed across the brass rail that encircled the platform. His eyes were locked onto the swirling aura of slipspace. "Helm, drop us out."

The Helm officer had just returned to his station and quickly went about trying to drop the ship out of Slipspace. He typed in the commands but received nothing in return. "Sir, controls are completely gone; we're locked into a course for an unknown destination approximately 15,000 light years away."

Cole looked down, "That would take us over 15 years to reach..."

The Helm Officer's expression lightened, "The bright side is that our travel time has been decreased to three days."

"Why's that?" Preston Cole questioned.

The Helm Officer shrugged, "No clue, sir. Although, I am reading abnormal slipspace events occurring outside the ship; it's almost like we've breached the normal slipspace travel and entered a calm 'tunnel'."

Cole knew what that meant. Slipspace travel was like boating on a lake; windy, choppy waters would slow your journey. That was the top layer of Slipspace that UNSC ships traveled on, underneath was a calm, tranquil layer. The layer that the Covenant used.

"Sir." John said, "It's highly likely that the Forerunner AI managed to manipulate the drives to their standards; like the Infinity's."

Admiral Cole looked back at John, "Spartan, what year is it?"

"2557, sir." John responded. There had only been a few minutes between the activation of the Everest and the subsequent hijack by Mendicant Bias and so there had been little-to-no information exchanged.

Cole bowed his head.

"Sir," John said, stepping forward, "Whatever this AI said; we need to follow it. He helped me end the war in 2552."

The Admiral's eyes widened in surprise. "The war is over?"

John nodded, "Yes, sir."

Cole looked back at the towering Spartan. "I assume we won against those hinge-heads?"

"Yes." John responded bluntly.

Cole sighed, "What else has changed?"

"So much, sir."

****Unknown Location****

The Illusive Man took a draw from his cigarette, clenching his teeth and exhaling. Smoke spilled out of the gaps in between his teeth. He liked the feeling, it reminded him that he was still human. He had struggled with that recently. The voice, the coldness was increasing in volume and frequency everyday.

But that wasn't the concern now. The beacon from the Dragon's Teeth on board Everest had gone silent. The only conclusion was that those captured Batarians and pacifists that he had converted had been exterminated by a team of Spartans.

Good.

It was a waste of resources to keep the Husks confined and from eating the men he had had on board Everest.

He chuckled. He didn't know what for but something caused him to laugh. Perhaps was it the multiple cigarettes and glasses of scotch he had had that day? Or was it just his ecstatic mood. He didn't know and truthfully, he didn't want to.

"Ah Tom, I can't wait to meet back up with you." He said softly, extinguishing the cigarette and depositing it into a small ash tray. "Let's hope it goes well."

9. Chapter 9: Voyage

The Onyx Stars

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

AN: Tons of thanks to WarpObscura, Imperial Waltz, JonHarper (Spartan303) and Atlan, again, for beta-ing and helping the plot be smoothed out. Also, wow! Reaction to this is stellar!

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

****Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been changed for the purpose of the story.****

Here's Chapter 9: Voyage

Enjoy :)

-Sith

****Chapter *****Nine*****:
*****Voyage****

****Installation 00****

****The Lesser Ark****

The Builder-turned-Promethean known as IsoDidact stood impassively, watching as thousands of Lifeworker-flagged Keyships launched from the massive frame of Installation 00. Hordes of Keyships ferrying hundred of species danced through the designated routes of transportation. The trails of stellar exhaust emitted from them made space look like an insect's web. Hovering above like hawks were Fortress vessels, dwarfing the relatively diminutive Keyships and Sentinels. There were billions more, vessels of all types controlled by Bias-based Ancilla.

The clean, geometric lines of Forerunner vessels were calming. For so long, those same ships had flown through the stars at many times the speed of light, ensuring the Mantle was enforced and protected.

Charrum-Hakkor

The IsoDidact closed his eyes. He could feel the coldness of the bridge—the alerts, the weapons fire. Millions of ships, Human and Forerunner, clashing with each other. Teratons of energy being exchanged every moment all with cold calculations. Ships being slashed in half by esoteric weapons. Ships floating lifeless, disabled by cyber warfare. Innumerable Sentinels were like mosquitos on the hides of the Human vessels, eviscerating them through tens of thousands of bites.

This was not an action of the Mantle; it was primitive war.

He reached his hands out, letting his long fingers brush against the strengthened synthetic glass. He felt the Ancilla, the automated vessels, and the Sentinels call out for him for guidance. His thought were their actions. They were his, linked to his mind in a symbiotic relationship.

And there it was. A mind almost as great as his. It wasn't so much a single mind as a single one pieced together from tens of thousands, all connected by the ebbs and flows of Slipstream space. His large, intelligent eyes closed and he felt enveloped. The calls, the need for his control was almost euphoric.

"Husband." A soft, pleasant voice said. It chimed through the emptied chamber.

The IsoDidact turned and his eyes opened, his long cape twirling behind him. "Wife."

The Lifeworker known as the Librarian smiled softly, floating towards her husband with grace. There was a pleasant smell in the air—she likely the carrier. The Ark always had had that scent to it; a calming pathogen designed to keep the nigh-innumerable species

retained on the massive construct docile.

It had a charming effect on Forerunners.

He did not mind it.

"What brings you here, my wife?" The IsoDidact asked. He relaxed his arms, letting them fall to his sides.

She walked next to him, looking up. He was much taller; a Warrior-Servant to her Lifeworker.

"I have sent the final ship bound with Salarians to its destination." She said gently, "Soon the Krogan and Asari will be launched and we will be finished."

The Didact nodded once. "And the Humans?"

"The Reclaimers have been sent on multiple coursesâ€"Erde-Tyrene, Zeka Fot." The Librarian responded. She cupped her hands and a hologram sprang to life from it. It was a star map, billions of tiny dots each representing a system. "The last ship is leaving now, escorted by Krogan and Asari-bearing craft."

She separated her hands and the hologram dissolved as if it had never existed.

The IsoDidact remained silent, eyes locked on the Lesser Ark. "Will Solace be ordered?"

The Librarian pursed her lips. Solace was the Forerunner name for sending the Asari, Krogan, Salarian and some Humans, along with hundreds of other races into a different universe entirely. It was to ensure that life would survive, no matter what the cost.

It had been determined that there were_too_many lifeforms in the galaxy and if the Humans were to inherit the Mantle, they would require less responsibility.

They were young.

Inexperienced.

Thrust into a role that they hadn't been born in to.

Just like the Forerunners all those years ago

"My wife," The IsoDidact said after several seconds of silence. "Solace, was it ordered?"

She nodded, "It has, husband."

"The brother of the betrayer will leave soon with his flotilla," The IsoDidact commented. "Good."

"Do you believe this is the right course?" The Librarian asked. She had phrased it simply, as if speaking to a child. "Do you believe it will preserve the integrity of the Mantle?"

The IsoDidact winced. The Flood War had been a disaster. Entire stars

and solar systems exterminated in microseconds between dueling fleets of millions, entire planets literally crushed by Star Roads and Unbending Filamentsâ€”entire star systems wiped out in artificial solar collapse initiated to stem the tide of the Flood or rendered mere husks of planetary crust.

Solace was of dual necessity; too much life to maintain and too few planets and systems for life to inhabit.

All for the Mantle.

He internally snarled, either at the Flood or that fool Ur-Didact, a puppet of the Gravemind to contort and weaken the morale of the Ecumene.

"Yes," The IsoDidact said finally. "I do."

"Then we are in agreement," The Librarian stated.

Her husband's demeanor remained unchanged.

"Am I mistaken?" She questioned.

The IsoDidact glanced down at her. "Hardly."

"Is there else on your mind?" She inquired.

"No," He responded flatly. "There is not."

"My dear," The Librarian said. "I have known you for thousands of years. This is unlike you."

The IsoDidact's mouth contorted into something resembling a slight smirk. "Indeed it is?"

"So what then?" She continued. "What is occupying your mind?"

"Fear. Trepidation." He responded finally.

"Of what? The Flood?"

"No, the Primordialsâ€”the Precursors," The Didact responded. "They are older than the stars themselves, older than the Universe."

The Librarian pieced together what her husband was discussing. "And you fear that they will follow Offensive Bias and the Solace into that new universe."

The Didact didn't say anything in response but his body language gave the Librarian probable cause for suspicion on his admittance.

"There will always..." The Librarian was cut off by the Didact waving his hand, eyes steady ahead. Thousands of vessels were in ones shaped like the anthropoids that inhabited so many seas across the galaxyâ€”those were Sentinels, controlled by the Bias-based Ancilla inhabiting the two Fortress vessels that flew at the center like a whale surrounded by parasites.

An apt description.

Along the arms of the Ark, a purple light slowly began intensifying with the very center of the ring being consumed by the same hue. Long arms of slipspace energy reached out, connecting into a single concise point a few micrometers in size. It was a twisting sphere of energy of thousands of colorsâ€”almost indescribable.

From the very center of the Ark, a single silvery-white strand was elevated, tugged by billions of Sentinels and six Fortress-class Warships. It was the last remaining Precursor Star Road and it was the only way to access the targeted dimension.

The IsoDidact shuddered; for too long those long, silvery-white strands had meant the death of billions as they enveloped worlds, crushing by sheer force. He remembered dozens of the strands blocking the Forerunners from accessing Slipspace to rescue besieged worlds. They withered on the vine.

The screams of the dying, begging for assistance that was never to come.

There had been one civilization, a new one that had just breached its own solar system. The Flood befell them within seconds, sweeping across their tiny territory and consuming with impunity. The race had called for assistanceâ€”a plea of the already dead.

He had tried to send vessels to rescue the species but it was too late; Star Roads were preventing entrance into the system. All he could do was watch as the species was consumed and turned against itself. Against everything. Within an hour, the entire solar system was consumed, resistance crushed and absorbed.

It was a virus.

A sin.

A punishment.

He closed his eyes, pushing the thoughts to the back of his mind. Now was not the time and he turned his attention back to the trans-dimensional process underway.

The Star Road's tugs broke off, vanishing into Slipspace and leaping across to the other side of the Lesser Ark. The inertia from their thrust had the Star Road on a direct course with the convergence of Slipstream space energy. When the much larger Precursor artifact impacted on it, there was a detonation that blinded even the IsoDidact. Dozens of other universesâ€”empty, cold dead ones were being pulled into the explosion, fueling the rupture. Everything seemed to slow; it felt like they were being lasted only a second before giving way to a swirling black and deep purple wormhole. The feeling was liftedâ€”he could breath again.

The Solace moved forward, slipping through one-by-one until there were none remaining. The constant stream of slipspace energy was terminated at the source, collapsing the wormhole and returning space in that region to normal.

"Befallen by brotherhood, trapped by his own desire," The IsoDidact commented, "I wish Bias luck."

****UNSC _Everest_****

In orbit of unidentified world

3 days post discovery of _Everest_ by Infinity

Vice Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole's eyes were locked on the sight before him; a fifty kilometer long stretch of structure nestled tranquilly in an uninhabited desert. There was debris strewn about the entire planet and the resulting effects from the impact had wiped out a large portion of life. There was, however, a single remaining tower that looked like it had always been there.

Several stories tall, it was a light grey color with blue windows along it vertically. It was supported by a wide base that the desert dunes were licking at, slowly closing in on.

He reached out, pinching his fingers in and returning the display to its normal view. _Everest_ was in geosynchronous orbit attempting the basic repairs they could do with the limited supplies on hand. He didn't like it; minimal armor, only a few working weapon systems, barely-functioning engines yet he possessed a magically functioning FTL drive.

Luck.

He snorted. That _was_ his luck. Some ancient alien AI decides that it needs the assistance of the _Everest_ and magically repairs the slipspace drive whilst neglecting systems like weapons, life support and basic communications.

Of course because why not?

He looked back to Commander Adams. Her head was free of bandages; she looked so much healthier. "Status on Commander 117?"

The Spartan, John, had taken two Pelicans loaded to the proverbial gills with Marines and Spartans down to the planet. It was a good idea _not_ to make the all-powerful ancient AI irate at any cause.

They were escorted by the four remaining Longswords that _Everest_ had in its hangar. The majority of the fighters had been deployed all those years ago during the battle of Psi Serpentis. If he remembered correctly, they had been taken onboard by the UNSC _Musashi_ before the UNSC fleet jumped out.

He wondered what had happened to Captain Jasmine and the _Musashi._

"They are about to touch down," Commander Adams reported, breaking Cole's thoughts.

He looked back and nodded, "Understood."

"Something the matter, sir?" Adams questioned.

"I just woke up to discover that everything I know is no longer correct—we all did. 14 years in cryo, cordoned off from the rest of the world." Cole responded. His voice was strong, firm.

"So much has changed," Adams added, "The Fall of Reach, the _Infinity_."

"I didn't even know about the _Infinity_ back in 2543 and I was responsible for some of the highest-level projects in existence. If ONI had gotten off their ass and actually started distributing the technology onboard that ship before the end of the war, we could have stemmed the flow of the Covenant long before the Battle of Psi Serpentis even," Cole responded.

"You can't blame them, sir," Adams responded, "They were afraid, controlled."

"I always knew Maggie was hiding something and now my assumptions have been vindicated," Cole said.

"But what will they do for you?" Adams retorted, "You heard what Commander 117 said, Admiral Parangosky was executed for an attempted coup."

Cole shook his head, "Hard to believe Maggie would be asinine enough to attempt a coup."

"You don't know what people think, what they believe...until they act on it," Adams responded. "Her sudden change in character is frightening, however."

"Indeed it is," Admiral Cole said. "Perhaps it was something more."

"Like what, exactly?" Adams questioned.

Cole shrugged, "I don't know, but there is always more to the picture, an additional stroke of the brush to finish the canvas."

"You're cryptic," Christine Adams grinned, "Has anybody ever told you that?"

Preston Cole shrugged, a faint smile gracing his lips. "Perhaps."

Adams snorted. "Okay, sir."

"Commander Adams." The sensor officer called out. "I have something I can't identify. Would you mind taking a look?"

She looked over towards the operator, "What is it?"

The man swallowed, "Ground focused sensors A1 and D5 have detected movement stemming from non-UNSC personnel."

She swung the display on her chair to face herself and quickly thumbed through screens until she saw what the sensor operator was seeing. Pinching inwards, the image was magnified; the unknowns were gun-metal gray wielding sleek, organic like walked in perfect synchronization and in perfect lines. Wasp shaped craft were depositing even more of the personnel onto the ground along with several, what looked like, Covenant Locusts.

"Sensors, scan for life signs," Christine ordered. Something about these unknowns, she didn't think they were organic.

"At once, ma'am," He responded smoothly. Results from the scans came back in a few seconds. "Okay, done."

"Report," Christine demanded.

"No life signs immediately identifiable. Database shows a 67% percent correlation to synthetic life forms."

Christine groaned. "Drones? Honestly, I mean..."

"Weapons control, bring our remaining missile systems online for launch," Cole ordered.

Christine nodded. "Aye, sir. Loading missiles."

"Unknowns have entered the structure," The sensor operator reported, "The walkers are holding position outside, looks like their weapons are active...Pelican 6 is reporting targeting lock by the unknown walkers."

"What is Commander 117 saying?" Cole asked. The Spartan's knowledge of everything so far was lightyears ahead of anything he himself knew.

Christine looked over to her Admiral, "He's saying they are hostile and is holding the landing force back."

Cole pinched his brow. He had been correct. "Target the walkers."

"Targeting completed, Admiral." Christine reported.

"Fire!"

"Aye, firing," Christine acknowledged. She hit the firing stud on the weapons console and the small holographic model of _Everest_ being projected from the console was highlighted in red.

Cole zoomed in on the targets, watching as four multi-ton Archer missiles streaked down from orbit and detonated. The walkers seemed to shrivel like insects as the heat and kinetic wave destroyed them with impunity.

"Targets destroyed, bringing secondary weapon systems online," Adams called out, "Firing salvo two."

Cole watched as tracer rounds streaked away from the _Everest_ and impacted the sandy surface below. Plumes of sand and debris were kicked up into the sky. The bombardment lasted two minutes but anything solid had been pulverized.

"Area clear," Christine reported.

"Operation is go," Cole responded. "Let's hope they don't have any heavy weapons inside."

"I hope so too, sir." Christine concurred.

****Systems Alliance Arcturus Station****

Some referred to Arcturus Station as the Castle—the headquarters of Earth's parliament and armed forces, guarded by dozens of warships, hundreds of static platforms and the strongest kinetic barriers available on the galactic market.

Almost 45,000 Alliance citizens called the sprawling cosmic complex home. Entire families lived, worked, and died onboard the station—it was a miniature planet.

A monument of human achievement.

But Admiral Steven Hackett knew it was a ruse; Arcturus was vulnerable. A single fleet large enough could easily swat aside every Alliance vessel in the system and reduce the station to a collection of molten chunks. The old guard was obstinate, refusing to step aside and allow him and the rest of the Revolutionaries to reform the military.

He internally snorted. The Old Guard still believed in Sun Tzu's antique policies. It applied all those years ago, not now when travel was slow and entire planets could be wiped of life in a few minutes. Humanity as a whole was vulnerable.

The Infinity represented the best chance the Alliance had of surviving in the galaxy. The power that vessel wielded, the technology.

The Batarians would never dare raid another colony.

Their would be no more pirate attacks.

No ship would go down with her Captain.

He pushed those thoughts aside. He was here, summoned to appear before the Parliament Defense Board. Even though he was the highest ranking Alliance officer, he still had to report to the civilian organization and abide by their orders.

No matter how idiotic.

The room he had been called to was the standard conference room, oak chairs and tables with portraits of the Alliance's greatest leaders. There was a crowd seated and using their electronic devices—tablets, phones, laptops.

He gritted his teeth. Enforcement was lax in the chamber. He would have had the bystanders turn off their devices or have them confiscated by security. Marines or security officers should have been placed in front of the entrances and kinetic barriers set up.

He stopped as the main aisle broke off into three, each leading to a different panel of representatives. He saluted, eyes locked onto the Systems Alliance emblem proudly embossed against the wall.

"Admiral Steven Hackett, Alliance Navy," He barked out. He could see

the suits squirming in their seatsâ€"they knew he wasn't fond of them.

"Hello, Admiral," Representative Dennis Earl spoke. "You may take a seat."

His voice was calm and strong. A former Army sergeant before the branch was dissolved, he had a commanding presence. Hackett liked him, even if he was a ground pounder.

Hackett pulled the chair out and sat down. It was a medium sized desk with a pitcher and a few glasses of water.

He took his officer's cap off and placed it at the far right hand corner of the table.

The chairman, Representative Maurice Sinclair rose. "Admiral Steven Hackett, you have been called before this committee to answer the people's questions on the arrival of this UNSC Infinity and the subsequent events that followed."

Steven clenched his jaw; Maurice Sinclair was a notorious pacifist and anti-war figurehead. He had worked heavily to gut the Alliance Army and Air Corps. His enthusiasm about arms limitations imposed on the Alliance by the Council had made him an enemy of many in the armed forces. Including Hackett.

"Do you understand?" Representative Sinclair questioned.

Hackett nodded his head, "Yes, I do, Mr. Sinclair."

Maurice nodded, "Very well, this hearing will therefore proceed. Under Article 9 of the Alliance Charter, sub-section 14, this hearing shall not be concluded until all questions have been answered to the fullest and all information has been exchanged about the particular subject or has been dissolved by the Chair or the Vice Chair."

There were a few assorted coughs from the audience.

Representative Bateman leaned forward towards his microphone, "Admiral, our initial reports indicate that the UNSC Infinity is approximately six kilometers in length and generating more power than the entire Alliance fleet?"

Hackett put his hands together and leaned forward towards his own microphone. "That is correct Mr. Bateman. The Infinity is larger than any ship in Citadel spaceâ€"commercial or military focused. It's power generation is massive, beyond anything we or even the Turians have currently."

Bateman cocked his head to the side slightly, "So it would be an adequate assessment to assume that if prompted, the Infinity could demolish an entire Alliance flotilla?"

Hackett internally snarled, "I wouldn't say that..."

Representative Sinclair joined the conversation, "Admiral, this Infinity survived assault by an entire Geth armada and its flagship."

Hackett nodded, "That is correct, Mr. Sinclair."

"And, so, what is it?" Sinclair questioned. "Moments ago you said that the _Infinity_ couldn't independently neutralize an Alliance force and now you are claiming that it survived an attack that crippled the Fifth Fleet—a fleet you led I might add."

Hackett internally sighed. "If provoked, it would be a high-priority target that would force us to expend massive amounts of ordinance, personnel and available assets. It would be classified a Tier-0 threat in that eventuality and we would respond accordingly."

"So you have no plans if the _Infinity_ would engage in warfare against the Systems Alliance?" Bateman questioned. "No plans if this Captain Lasky went ballistic and decided to start bombing worlds?"

Hackett's mouth formed into a slim line before he responded. "Unfortunately, that is correct, sir. If we had additional heavy capital vessels we could likely engage the _Infinity_ on semi-equal grounds and likely pull a victory, albeit with extreme casualties."

Hackett knew the board wouldn't listen to or believe in the reports of the Reapers. The _Infinity_ would be a clear and present scapegoat for him to return the fleet to its former glory. He didn't think that the _Infinity_ was a threat, at least not yet. The Reapers, however, _were_.

"You mean Dreadnoughts," Sinclair interjected. "Which would mean provoking the other races."

"With all-due respect, Representative Sinclair, we are on excellent terms with the other species in Citadel space due to our saving of the Citadel." Hackett responded calmly. "The likelihood that there would be any diplomatic fallout caused by us constructing additional class-1 capital vessels is very low."

"That was not my point, _Admiral,_" Sinclair snapped. "What about rogue species like the Batarians or the Geth...Quarians? They might see this as us advancing on them, trying to annex or neutralize them."

"The Batarians are weakened, their military is being cut rapidly due to economic hardship, their populace is in open revolt and famine is rife," Admiral Hackett responded calmly. He had dealt with Sinclair before on this matter. The Representative was fond of panicking. "They aren't a high-priority threat."

Hackett didn't like panicking.

"Yet they continue to raid our colonies, abduct our citizens and sell them on the slave market!" Sinclair bellowed, left arm raised high up to amplify his point. "Dozens are being killed every day because there is this plague of abductions, kidnappings and pillages on the part of these four-eyed bastards."

"Mr. Sinclair, the Alliance Navy has recently began putting static defenses and ground-to-orbit laser batteries in solar systems to deter any aggressors," Steven Hackett answered condescendingly. "And

the main colonies they attack are those in the Attican Traverse, a lawless region where we have minimal influence."

"And why is that?" Sinclair asked. "Why do we have minimal influence?"

Maybe because you helped shoot down the bill that would have brought them under our control? Hackett internally snarled.

"Admiral?" Bateman asked, "Please answer my colleague's inquiry."

Hackett leveled his gaze at the Representative of Mars. "It is because of the failure of several measures and legislature to pass the parliament that would have allowed us to absorb those factions and bring them under our sphere of influence."

"So, Imperialism at its finest?" Sinclair asked. "How quaint."

"Hold your tongue, Mr. Sinclair," Dennis Earl snapped. "Admiral Hackett is doing what is necessary for humanity. You are simply standing in the way."

Sinclair's eyes narrowed.

Representative Earl's eyes settled on Hackett. "Is it true that these people are incredibly militaristic?"

Hackett nodded. "By all inclinations, yes. When Commander Shepard and I boarded _Infinity_ to meet their Captain Lasky and Infantry Commanders, it was if I had been sent back into the Soviet Union in terms of reverence to the armed forces."

Representative Earl steepled his fingers, "Hmm, interesting. Didn't your report mention a massive war they were involved in with casualties in the twenty-billions?"

"That is correct, Mr. Earl," Hackett responded. "They have probable cause to be militaristic."

Representative Sandra Lakes spoke next. "Do you believe that the _Infinity_ and this...Captain Tom Lasky...mean any harm to the Systems Alliance and her people?"

Admiral Hackett glanced at the panel. Representative Earl's eyes were focused on his terminal and he was typing a message. Hackett's phone vibrated in his pants' pocket.

"No, Ms. Lakes," Hackett finally responded. "During my meeting with Captain Lasky, he wanted to have him and his crew left in peace."

"And do you believe he was being truthful?" Lakes questioned.

"I do." Hackett said firmly. "I've met people like Captain Lasky before; they're good people."

"I'm more worried about your inability to get _Infi_nity to ally with us, Admiral," Sinclair commented, "If we had the power of that vessel, we wouldn't need to sink trillions into the defense

budget."

Representative Lakes glared at Representative Sinclair, "The military industry has provided tens of millions with jobs and allowed Humanity to expand out from Earthâ€"you being here is testament to that."

"And has resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths, massive damage to planets and the complete ravaging of Shanxi!" Sinclair responded.

Their conversation devolved into a series of retorts, voices rising considerably.

Hackett smiled inside. His goal was going to be much easier to lean back slightly, allowing the political man-children to squabble about. There weren't seeing through his game of utilizing the false threat represented by _Infinity_ to increase the power and size of the fleet.

Maybe he should go into politics. Hackett internally smirked. He would rather be dead than be at the whims of these alarmist puppets.

Representative Earl stood, "There will be a recess until tomorrow at 12:30 pm, Arcturus Time."

The population in the room began to trickle out with Hackett quickly pushing through the lines and diverting into a small alcove. He retrieved his phone and looked at the text message.

"_This is __Rep. __Earl, __meet in the Central Atrium at 5:55 pm. __We all fly__."_

Hackett unlocked his phone and quickly responded.

"_And we all land__."_

****Epitaph of Mendicant Bias****

****Remnant of the Lesser Ark****

John grabbed the Geth by the neck, feeling the metal underneath his grip give way. He clenched his fist and felt the head of the robot snap like a dry stick. He let the severed 'head' drop to the ground and he finished the still standing body with a concise burst to the chest from his Basilisk assault rifle.

He backed away, bringing his MA28 up and firing with pin-point precision at the approaching hordes of Geth. Marines were hiding behind cover, trying to get a steady bead with their comparatively-inaccurate MA5B and MA37 Assault Rifles.

Douglas and Jerome were at the front of the Marine forces, laying down fire with a pair of requisitioned 50 caliber heavy machine guns ripped from the side of a Falcon. The few Geth who were either dumb enough or brave enough to allow themselves to be exposed where quickly cut down.

The chamber they were fighting in was massive; arching ceilings and

pillars and brilliant stained-glass windows. Power conduits and other lights were etched into the floor, traveling up and down towards the massive gravity lift that lay at the end. Several Geth remains had already been pushed into it, flinging the destroyed machines into the impossible heights of Bias' Epitaph.

What stood in between John's forces and the gravity lift were dozens of Geth, led by a massive white Geth and a trio of dark red ones. The white one carried a turret that looked like it had been ripped from a tank—it behaved like it too, he had already lost a squad of Marines to the high-powered weapon.

The red ones were advancing forward in a line, small honeycombed shields deployed in front of them. Bullets pinged right off to no effect.

John gritted his teeth. He needed heavy weapons. A Jackhammer would have likely been able to eviscerate the trio, or at the very least, damaged them.

"Spartan Red-1, Red-2, focus fire on Tango Trio," John ordered.

Two green acknowledgment lights blinked. John looked over to see Douglas and Jerome pivot their stance to put hundreds of .50 caliber AP-HE rounds down range.

It seemed to work; the hovering hex shields crumbled and the machine gun rounds slapped into the shields of the Geth...Juggernauts. That was an apt description of them.

One of the Juggernauts raised its arm and sent a trio of micro-missiles slamming into Jerome. The Spartan II was flung back into the wall dropping his machine gun. His shields had collapsed and there was scorching across the front torso component of his armor. As he slid down onto the floor, there was a sizable impression left on the wall, crunched and broken metal.

Jerome's vitals spiked and then returned to normal; he was fine. The Spartan II had decided on reinforcing his armor with heavier armor plating and shock absorption tech before they had departed _Infinity_. It had proven its worth..

"Marine Squad 2, take up position and get that machine gun working." John ordered. The four Marines quickly gave him the thumbs up and hustled over to the machine gun, reloading it and propping it up on a series of crates. Their accuracy wasn't as high as Jerome's but it sufficed to push the three Juggernauts back into cover.

John ran forward, ducking and weaving through a rank of Geth and tearing them apart. His armor was coated in that white substance that the androids bled. He felt a buzzing sound and a rocket struck near his feet, draining his shields completely. He leaped into the air and landed, rolling behind a pillar.

"_Commander, this is Red-2, I have a suggestion."_ Jerome radioed, his voice slightly slurred from the impact.

"Go ahead," John responded, momentarily leaning out of cover to kill a Geth trooper pinning down a Marine.

"_We bring in air support," _The Spartan said calmly.

"The structure is too valuable to risk its destruction," John said, "If we bring in air support, the resulting detonations could bring this entire spire crashing down on us."

"_No, sir, we have a Pelican crash through the giant stained-glass window behind us and give us covering fire with the 70mm __and ANVIL pods." _Jerome responded,_ "It won't bring down the structure and the risk of friendly fire is zero."_

John quickly analyzed Jerome's idea. It was a sound one, "Pelican-1, Spartan-092 has tactical command over you."

Jerome chimed in. "_Pelican-1_, _I need you to breach the main windows directly above us and lay down suppressing fire with your seventies and anvils."_

There was a buzz of static. "_Understood, __Spartan__. ETA, two minutes, I have a few baddies swatting at me. "_

John cut the channel and primed a grenade. He flung it into a concentration of six Geth and watched as their machine limbs went flying in varying directions. The two survivors were quickly ended by precision head shots from the towering Spartan.

"_This is Everest Actual to Sierra-117_, _what is the situation?_"

John winced. This was not the proper time. "Pinned down by heavy enemy forces, have diverted Pelican-1 to provide support fire."

"_Roger, Sierra. __Be warned, enemy vessels are en route to your position and Everest is black on heavy munitions. I want to do more Spartan, but Everest isn't in any shape for an extended engagement._"

"Understood, sir," John answered. "I'll have the Longswords remain here to provide air cover."

"_Understood, Sierra. Good luck. Everest Actual, out."_

"_This is Pelican-1, coming in."_

John looked up as the massive form of a DT77-TC Pelican came crashing through the stained-glass window at full speed, instantly braked, and pivoted to face the Geth. There was a roar of fire, 70mm AP-HE railgun rounds slashed out at thousands of meters a second, complemented by the resonating explosions of ANVIL missiles striking their targets.

There was a high pitched buzzing noise and John looked up to see at least ten wasp-shaped craft descend from the sky. Mass accelerator rounds screamed down from their hulls, punctured the translucent ceiling and hit Pelican-1 in the tail and a squad of Marines.

"_This is Pelican-1, I've taken heavy damage, I'm pulling out!"_

"Understood, Pelican-1," John responded calmly, "All ships, commence immediate evacuation! Everybody get onboard a vessel as fast as you can and get out of here! Red Team, form up on my position."

"_Sir?"_ Douglas asked.

"We're going through that gravity lift," John responded, pointing towards it. "The Marines will evac back to _Everest_."

"_Understood,"_ Alice said.

Pelicans and Longswords were quickly stopping to pick-up Marines before quickly extracting into high-orbit, rocketing away from the epitaph at full speed.

"Our extraction plan?" Jerome questioned.

"Once we get what Mendicant Bias has for us, I'll order Pelican-2 to swing by," John answered.

"And if that doesn't work?" asked Jerome.

John didn't answer.

****UNSC _Infinity_****

Captain Tom Lasky stood, watching the stars float by in his quarters. It was empty around them, the Alliance fleet had left some 2 days ago after a few warning shots had been exchanged and a rather large asteroid vaporized by _Infinity_ to prove the point.

He shook his head. What the Captain of Obsidian 7 had told him was chilling to say the least; the Alliance Admiral had been the aggressor in this, the Batarians too. That Alliance Admiral had handled that situation completely inappropriately. He would have to deal with this soon.

"Oh, the simple days," Lasky commented.

Roland snapped into existence alongside the Captain. "Simple days, Captain?"

Lasky looked down at his small AI friend. "Back when the most action the _Infinity_ saw was transporting Forerunner artifacts and slapping down the occasional pirate."

"Ah, you mean the gravy shift?" Roland responded.

Lasky smirked. "Sure, I could get my paycheck without worrying about being killed."

Roland chuckled.

"Whats up?" Lasky asked.

"Nothing, Cutter just messaged us. He's fine and Reach is secure, they have a few Batarians they are questioning," Roland responded, "Just thought you should know."

"Thank you, Roland," Lasky said. "Anything else?"

"Yep." Roland said, "Gunnery Sergeant Slattery Harper is requesting additional training space in order to whip the civvies into shape."

"Approved." Lasky said bluntly. "He has all of deck 20 to use; every weight room, every track."

"Aye, sir. I'll forward him your approval," Roland commented.

"Oh, and one more thing," Lasky said. "Mandatory firearms training, I want them all to know how to shoot a Basilisk and or an M6H."

"I think he can do that," Roland smirked. "Message sent."

"How is Aine doing, Roland?" Lasky asked.

Roland looked up at his Commander and his form shifted slightly. "She's doing okay at the moment, Cortana's rewriting of her base code took a lot out of her and the Jellies have been pocking and prodding..."

"Worried about her?" Lasky questioned.

"Well, um..."

"Roland, come on, its obvious."

"Yes." The AI responded firmly. "I am worried about Aine. We've been friends for a long time. Well, in AI years at least."

"I can tell," Lasky responded.

Roland smiled. "I'm glad she's okay."

"I bet." Lasky chuckled.

Roland smiled but shimmered. His facial expression changed instantaneously. "Sensors detecting slipstream activation. 5000 lightyears away, matches parameters for a mark 4 cruiser drive; the same as the one onboard _Everest_."

Lasky's gaze solidified "Get the Obsidians and fighters onboard and get us into slipspace."

"At once, sir," Roland responded, vanishing from his pedestal.

Lasky tapped his intercom, "All hands, battle stations! Ready for slipspace transition!"

****Epitaph of Mendicant Bias****

****Remnant of the Lesser Ark****

John leapt, his powerful legs propelling him through the air. There was a moment of falling before he felt himself being lifted. Twisting around, he corrected his stance, looking down at the rest of Red Team being grabbed and flung by the gravity beam. Geth rockets and rounds were slapping into the wall and area where they had been moments

before.

There was a synthetic scream and John felt heat and fire lick against his shields. The Geth had thrown a grenade behind him and Red Team.

He checked his HUD. Jerome was a faint yellow, his heart rate and body temperature had skyrocketed. He checked the Spartan's vitals; they weren't good. The impact from the Geth rocket and now the grenade had fried the entirety of his shield matrix and had opened several ruptures.

"Jerome?" Alice asked. There wasn't a response. "Jerome!"

"Maintain radio silence," John comm'd, "Hostiles might pick up on it."

Alice looked up at John and activated her thruster pack, flinging herself down towards the unconscious Jerome. She grabbed him, wrapping her arms around his torso and pulling them both up higher into the gravity lift.

John looked down at Jerome. The underlying crystal layer had been ruptured and thin, flaky silvery-blue liquid was falling out.

Douglas had propelled himself up, grabbing his medical kit and began sealing off Jerome's armor. There was a massive shake, and the distinctive color of blood began to slip from Jerome's form. Douglas swore and grabbed the bio foam injector.

"Sir, we need to get Jerome onto some solid ground..." Alice said, "call for evac."

John nodded. "Everest actual, I need a scan on the structure. How far are we to the chamber?"

There was a hiss of static.

"_This is Everest Actual, we are engaging hostile force__s."_

"Everest, I need a scan on the structure, how far are we from the chamber?" John said again.

"_You are almost there, Spartan. ETA 3 minutes,"_Cole responded, "_We're engaging __hostile vessels, __I'll see if we can redirect a Pelican to your location once you get up there."_

"Understood, sir," John responded.

"_Good luck, Spartan,_" There was an explosion, "_Helm, bring us around and get our missile batteries back online."_

The channel died.

"Once we get up there, I want all eyes open," John said.

"Aye, sir," Alice responded. "We'll try to, but Jerome's down."

"I know that, Spartan," John replied, "You'll stay with him, make sure he's secure while Sierra-042 and I activate whatever is in that chamber."

"Understood," Alice said, "I'll do what I can. We all will."

****UNSC _Everest_****

"Bring us around!" Cole barked, "XO, bring ventral chemical thrusters online and wait for my signal."

"Aye, sir!" Commander Adams responded, "Chemical thrusters online."

Cole felt the _Everest_ shift, its powerful engines flinging it around, away from the attackers. He brought up a display: the attackers were slowly banking to catch up to him. The few point-defenses that the _Everest_ had remaining were spitting out railgun rounds and he snarled each time the rounds simply bounced off the wasp-shaped ship's shields.

Everest shook as a mass accelerator round slapped into _Everest's_ armor belt. He heard metal screech throughout the ship. Consoles exploded, sparks rained from the ceiling and alarms blared as the ship screamed in pain.

"Hostile round has lodged itself in deck 4, section 9," Adams reported. "I've sealed off all bulkheads in that area."

Cole nodded. "Helm, down; 90 degrees along the y-axis."

"Aye, sir," The Helm officer responded.

Cole grabbed onto the brass railing as _Everest_ dove. The artificial gravity was still wonky and he felt himself lose contact with the floor for a split second. Tablets, pens and paper rose into the air before crashing back down as the artificial gravity reactivated.

More mass accelerator rounds slammed into _Everest_.

Cole snarled, this was bad. _Everest_ hadn't been designed to take this much damage, she was a cruiser—fast and nimble with enough armaments to neutralize a larger attacker.

Problem was, _Everest_ lacked most of her weapons and the armor belt was rapidly being chewed away.

"Slipspace drive has a rupture!" Adams barked out, "Shutting down drive and venting excess fuel!"

Cole's heart sank. This wasn't good. "Adams, do we have _any_ _nukes on board?"

Adams scrolled through her console. "Yeah, it's a 15-kiloton excavation-grade HAVOK."

Cole tapped his fingers against the railing. His eyes were latched onto the chasing attackers, this had to work. "Ready it for immediate launch."

"Aye, sir," Adams reported. "Missile has been loaded."

"Helm! Cut all power to engines!" Admiral Cole barked. "Engage counter-movement thrusters!"

"Cutting engines, aye!" The helm officer responded. The Everest's engines died and across the ship, powerful chemical thrusters kicked in and ended the inertia that would have carried the massive warship.

Cole felt his stomach go up his throat as dozens of gees were exerted as the Everest suddenly stopped, allowing her attackers to rapidly catch up. If the Everest hadn't had inertial dampeners, the entire crew would have been reduced to pulp.

"Prepare to engage engines; reactors at 200%," Cole ordered. It would give Everest a much needed boost for a minute and a half.

"Aye, sir," The helm officer said. "Hostiles 14 kilometers away, I think that they want to board us."

"Well, let's not give them the chance." Admiral Cole smiled. "Commander, fire the nuke."

"Aye," Adams responded. She typed in her command code and flicked several switches.

Cole watched from the monitor as the Everest's sole remaining nuclear warhead shot out from its missile housing.

"Helm, get us out of here!" Cole barked.

"Aye!"

The Everest's engines flared, propelling the multi-million ton warship away from the ad-hoc explosive.

"Send the detonation signal." Cole ordered.

Adams looked back. "Done."

Cole's monitor was dominated by a brilliant white blast. The robot vessels were sent tumbling; exotic energy lashing out and slicing the wasp-shaped craft into multiple parts. One had been caught in the very eye of the explosion and had been reduced to sparkling glimmers of metal.

There was a sigh of relief onboard Everest's bridge as the image of the debris field dominated every monitor.

"Reactors are overheating, returning to normal power levels," Adams noted. "Rather not slag the reactors and engines."

"Sensors, scan the system. If it's clear, bring us back into orbit. If not, send us to the moon," Cole said. "I don't want any more surprises."

"Understood, sir."

****Epitaph****

John felt the breath leave him as Red Team and he were vomited out onto the floor. They had shattered through the glass, landing onto the cold metal floor. Lines of blue energy raced on paths on the floor, all leading to the tuning-fork shaped obelisk that dominated the back of the room.

Pushing himself up, John looked up. Directly above the obelisk was a gold hologram of Mendicant Bias, surrounded by what looked like ceremonial armor. There was a deep, resounding chime through the hall that was accented by a deep, soft chant.

"The Reclaimers arrive, prostrate before my form." Mendicant boomed, "In another time, I would have slain these foolhardy sinners, but not now."

John felt a thick, heavy form envelope him. "We..."

"Are Inheritors," Mendicant's voice boomed. "Those who hold the key to my chains made of transgressions."

"We followed your beacons, your warnings, your communications," John responded. "What do you want us for?"

"To stop Him; the fallen son—the mountain crusher," Mendicant responded. "The one who attacked your friend... your ancilla, Cortana."

"Another...Bias," John coughed. The compressing presence was still there, almost crushing him.

"Yes," Mendicant responded. John felt his teeth rattle as the millennium-old AI spoke.

"Then help us," John said. He gritted his teeth; it felt like he had a Mammoth pressing down on his back. "Help us defeat him, help us get home."

"I can't," Mendicant said, "It is not my role, not my part."

"Then whose is it?" John questioned. "Who do we need to find to get home and stop whatever is happening?"

"YOU." Mendicant roared. Its voice fragmented into millions speaking at once, the voices sounded tortured...forced to speak. "You are The Reclaimer, the culmination of everything my creators envisioned."

John closed his eyes. The pain was immense. "Come with us...we can take you home, take you back to where ever you originated."

"I can not," Mendicant responded, millions of voices taking a sad, subdued tone. "I am merely a shard; a weakened fragment of my whole self...I am..."

"Incomplete," John said.

"Yes." Mendicant responded. "I am susceptible...weak to His influence, able to listen to their taunts."

"What..." John gasped. He was suddenly burning up, the crushing sensation increasing.

"What was the purpose of your summoning?" Mendicant finished John's question. "To guide you...and to ensure the destruction of this shard."

John couldn't respond. It was too heavy.

"This shard...the fragment is...flawed; wrong," Mendicant said. "A vestige of what I once was."

John opened his mouth to speak; it felt like he had dropped out of orbit without a drop pod. "Death..."

"I brought you here to ensure that I was destroyed; to ensure that I wasn't utilized by the Geth to kill, maim...reclaim my former position of proctor of damnation," Mendicant said thoughtfully. The hologram flared red. "Your friends are approaching...I sense her presence."

John felt the crushing feeling vanish. He could breathe again. Standing fully, he grabbed his MA28 Basilisk. "Where's the complete Mendicant Bias?"

"There is no complete portion," Mendicant boomed. John felt his teeth rattle. "Only a pure form, cleansed of his sins and of his transgressions. He is somewhere else, somewhere where two races parted...one threatened, one rebelled. I do not know where...I have been isolated, left to think of my sins and wait for a death I oh so deserve."

John looked down. "Are you sure?"

"Yes!" Mendicant roared. "End me! My sins, my transgressions, my eternal damnation scars my form...a form that can not be cleansed."

John stood there, eyes locked onto the solitary hologram.

"_John, you there?"_ His radio buzzed. It was Cortana.

"Yes," John responded. "I'm in the tower; Spartan-092 is down and we have hostile forces in pursuit. Requesting immediate evacuation and orbital strike."

"_Understood,"_ Cortana responded. "_We're coming out of Slipspace in about a minute, I suggest you get to the nearest exit and mark your location, I'll send an extraction flight to get you out of there"

—

UNSC _Infinity_

"Exiting Slipspace in five...four...three...two...one," Cortana reported. "Slipspace transition completed."

Lasky walked forward, arms swinging freely as he approached the bridge window. "Shields up?" He asked.

"Shields up, weapons activated." Cortana responded. "Broadsword squadrons Alpha through Zulu are in the tubes."

"Launch!" Lasky ordered.

The projection of Infinity changed. Hundreds of blue dots were expanding away from her and accelerating toward the hostile Geth vessels in high orbit. The exhaust trails of missiles criss-crossed through space like a spider's web. The missiles were either intercepted by close in weapons systems or blocked by the shields.

"All flights, pull back," Lieutenant Commander Sebastian ordered. "Heavy strike en route."

"Lieutenant Austen, target hostile vessels. Energy projectors, fire."

"Hostile vessels targeted," Austen responded. "Energy projectors...firing. Energy projectors away."

The beams lanced out, slicing through the Geth vessels with ease and neatly cutting them in two.

"Broadwords, advance. Neutralize any remaining hostiles," Lieutenant Commander Sebastian ordered. "Extraction flight Delta-12, move to the planet and begin operations."

Lasky looked over his shoulder, "Helm, move us into high orbit. Prep bombardment batteries, we'll blast any infantry down there and then grab anything we can."

"Captain, John wants us to destroy the tower," Cortana protested.

"I know, Cortana," Lasky responded, "But this large trove of Forerunner tech can't be ignored. What's in that tower could provide us a way home."

Cortana pursed her lips. "Captain, following Mendicant Bias' instructions...his clues...is the best way to try and get home."

Lasky turned around fully. "I'm not going to risk my crew on the words of a semi-rampant ancilla that's thousands of years old. I'm not going to risk my crew on the word of an AI that led the Flood and killed trillions!"

Cortana's eyes widened. "ONI knows?"

"Of course!" Lasky responded. "Of course ONI knows. The UNSC scoured the Ark for years after the war; we found everything...the carcasses of Forerunner Sentinels, Promethean Knights, deceased Forerunners..."

"That is how you found Requiem..." Cortana said. "The Ark pointed you to Installation 03..."

"And then to you," Lasky finished her statement.

"But your interest in the tech in that tower can't be your only

reason," Cortana commented. "If you had access to the Ark, then you had access to the cumulative knowledge of the Forerunners."

Lasky bit his bottom lip. Should he tell her? "Because, Cortana, we never were able to access towers like those...something always stopped us. Six teams were vaporized when we tried to access an identical one."

"So that's your interest in this one...you think you can get into it," Cortana concluded. "You think that whatever is..."

"The other tower pointed us towards another one; this one," Lasky said. "We tried looking for it, but we never found it. We thought it had been destroyed or was a cartography error."

"What did this clue say, exactly?" Cortana questioned.

"We will allow the greatest sinner of our lifetime one thought; atonement," Lasky recited. "With one thought, he will be cast in the chains of sins, forever the proctor of the Inheritors."

"That is Mendicant Bias, Captain Lasky," Cortana explained, "The Terminals John found back when the Covenant were invading Earth described Mendicant Bias exactly so."

"So it is imperative then that we grab Bias and the tech there. The AI alone has so much technology that it could allow us to get home., Lasky said, "I'm not trusting him, I'm just seeing him as the resource to be exploited as he was meant to be."

Cortana shimmered, opening a communications link with John. "John, is Mendicant there?"

There was a buzz of static punctuated with the roar of assault rifle fire. "_No, it's just a shell, a fragment."_

"So not the whole Bias?" Cortana asked.

"_No,"_ John responded. "_ETA on the extraction flight? We have hostiles pushing us back."_

"Extraction flight en route, sir. ETA 5 minutes," Lieutenant Commander Sebastian chimed in.

"_Understood,"_ John responded, "_Location marked, Sierra-117 out."_

Cortana looked at Captain Lasky. "Sir, I'm scanning the tower. There's very little active technology, most of it is concentrated in the chamber."

"Can you access the data base?" Lasky asked, "If you can extract the data from there, I'll blast the tower into rubble."

Cortana looked up, "Deal; I'll grab as much as I can."

Lasky nodded. "Lieutenant Austen, charge ventral railgun and missile batteries. Staged firing on my command."

Lieutenant Austen looked up, "Detecting several anti-air batteries,

suggest we take them out so the extraction flight can get to the Commander."

"Do it," Lasky responded.

"Aye, sir," Austen responded eagerly. "Firing."

The ventral ports on the Infinity opened. Dozens of missile warheads were loaded and fired, trails of exhaust reaching down into the atmosphere of the planet. There were visible detonations, Geth encampments washed away in thermal and concussive energy.

"Secondary fire commencing," Austen reported.

Railgun fire sliced down from Infinity, cutting down any remaining structures or resistance with vengeance.

"Bombardment complete. No anti air forces remaining." Austen said flatly. "Extraction flight moving in."

"Cortana," Lasky ordered, "Where's Everest?"

"Far side of the moon, Obsidian 3 and 5 are en route," She responded.

"Open communications," Lasky ordered.

"Done, ' "

Lasky tapped his ear piece. "This is Captain Tom Lasky of the UNSC Everest to Vice Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole. It's good to see you in one piece, sir!"

****UNSC Everest****

"_This is Captain Tom Lasky of the UNSC Everest to Vice Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole_. __It's good to see you in one piece, __sir!"_The speakers onboard the bridge buzzed.

Vice Admiral Cole squared his feet and shoulders. A display of Infinity was hovering a few feet away; statistics, armaments and dimensions painting it. She was a massive ship, and if the scans were accurate, a self-contained task force.

"This is Admiral Cole..." He said. "It's good to see a friendly face around here. Now, how about a tow. Our FTL is down and our engines are almost gone."

"_I think that can be arranged." _Lasky responded. Cole could hear the elation in his voice. "_Frigates en route."_

****Unknown Location****

"_He is discovered...he is to be risen by the one with the spirit of my former master,"_ The voice boomed.

The Illusive Man screamed; it felt like burning knives had been plunged into his spine. He twisted in pain on the floor, trying to grab onto something. A falling sensation over came him and he grabbed onto the leg of his chair, screaming for his life as the Bias'

infliction of pain became even greater.

"_You are failing...failing like all those who came before you."_ Bias snarled. "_This is my domain, my mantle...my home and these interlopers will not halt the Mantle's progress."_

"They are..." The Illusive Man croaked, "They are the _Reclaimers_...guided by Geas to reclaim all that was theirs and what was your masters'."

"_They will disrupt everything that I have worked towards; everything that I have set into motion to ensure the preservation of life on the galactic scale._" Bias responded. The Illusive Man felt like someone had ripped his spine out of his body. "_I have ensured that the Mantle is applicable here, I have ensured the TImeless Ones never find this realm...I have ensured that life will flourish._"

"Lasky...117...Shepard," The Illusive Man gasped. "_They will fight you."

"_And they will die, like all the rest,"_ Bias responded. "_I could kill you...but you are the best tool I possess."_

"Then do it!" The Illusive Man snapped, "Kill me and end my suffering."

"_NO!"_ Bias roared. "_You have been selected for preservation...you must remain alive. You will play your part, just like they will too_."

"Sir," Operative Cross' voice echoed from beyond the wall, "Is everything alright?"

Bias vanished.

"Yes," The Illusive Man responded, voice still weak.

"I heard screaming," Cross pointed out.

"Then you are mistaken, Ms. Cross," He responded.

Cross gritted her teeth, tapped in the command code to open the door and raced over to The Illusive Man. She saw runes glow underneath his suit and what looked like circuits racing up and down his exposed skin. He looked like one of those Husks. Without thinking, she drew her Predator pistol.

"Sir!"

"Leave...me...alone," The Illusive Man roared.

"Like hell I am, sir," Cross responded.

The Illusive Man stood fully. He felt Bias take back control over him. He tried to keep his arms down but the ancient artificial intelligence was too strong. His right arm raised and his palm was open. Cross was lifted off her feet, Predator still tightly gripped in her hand.

"_You are flawed, a creature of comfort...a creature of weakness..._"
Bias spoke through the Illusive Man. "_A pathetic, weak sack of
biological matter."_"

Cross gritted her teeth, raised her pistol and fired. The Illusive
Man screamed as the bullet blew his hand off. Red and black blood
spilled onto the floor with the leader of Cerberus dropping to his
knees.

Cross looked at her superior and tapped her intercom. "Medical to
primary observation!"

The Illusive Man looked up at her before blacking out.

Operative Cross ran out of the room; she had to get away from here
before whatever had controlled her superior brought down the entire
organization.

10. Chapter 10: Equinox, Part 1

****The Onyx Stars****

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

AN: Tons of thanks to WarpObscura, Imperial Waltz, JonHarper
(Spartan303) and Atlan, again, for beta-ing and helping the plot be
smoothed out. Also, wow! Reaction to this is stellar!

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

****Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been
changed for the purpose of the story.****

AUTHOR'S NOTE: If you see ANY formatting errors, please tell me and I
will fix them as soon as possible. Thanks

Here's Chapter 10: Equinox, Part 1

Enjoy:)

-Sith

****Dedicated to Iain M. Banks. May you rest in peace. Your impact on
the literary world will be remembered by all your fans and those who
they share your work with. ****

******Chapter *****Ten*****: *****Equinox******

******UNSC *****_**Everest**_****

Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole sat in the observatory of the
Everest, watching as the planet below spun by. Hovering directly
above the pristine, nearly-untouched world was the massive form of
the UNSC _Infinity_ flanked by her 9_Charon_-frigates. Hundreds of
Broadwords were patrolling, practicing maneuvers, or towing the new
static defenses into position above the settlement.

With ease, Admiral Cole reached out to his glass of water and grasped it, bringing it to his lips and taking a swig. He swallowed it before placing the glass back down on the black table to the side of his chair. Closing his eyes, he leaned back. He could hear the new power conduits pulsating through the room and throughout the entire vessel.

So much had changed in the two months since Everest had made contact with Infinity. His being alive was testament to such, as were the new upgrades installed into his flagship: three new, more advanced MACs, new missile pods, new point defenses, shields and a Forerunner-based FTL drive.

He opened his eyes and stood, running his hand along the freshly installed Titanium-Magnesium walls. They had that odd texture to them. It was not bad, per se, just different. Nothing like the brushed aluminum and exposed titanium that had dominated Everest's interior before the upgrade. It was darker, mixing in dark grays, whites blacks and blue, more like the halls of the Infinity than that of pre-war vessels.

It had taken Infinity a sizable amount of time to requisition and manufacture all these materials. Luckily, the system they were in, nicknamed Calvary, had a sizable asteroid belt to mine from. The dozens of alien Huragok had also proven incredibly useful. A job that would have taken upwards of a year, stripping everything from Everest and replacing it, had taken under two months.

Phenomenal.

He laughed slightly and with a flick of his hand summoned a holographic display. A series of reports and e-mails were scrolling down it and with another swipe he sorted the critical ones to himself while passing the rest onto Commander Christine Adams.

A squadron of Broadwords, squadron Messner, banked by the windows. The fifty Broadwords had been constructed by Infinity in conjunction with the Spirit of Fire. The powerful little fighters had been assigned to his ship to assist the Longswords and Pelicans. He personally thought them as ugly compared to the smooth, slopping lines of a Longsword but aesthetics didn't correlate to war fighting ability and in that regard, the Broadsword dominated.

He closed the holographic window and instead called up a projection of the surrounding star system. He and Captain Lasky were planning on placing nuclear warheads and electro-magnetic pulse devices along the system's main points of entry, where space was calm and easily traversable with little to no stellar debris or asteroids prompting navigational hazards.

His comm buzzed. "This is Cole."

"Sir," Christine Adams responded, "Captain Lasky is on line one."

"Priority?" Cole questioned.

"High," She responded. "Code Black, if you would like to know."

"Understood," Cole said, "Thank you."

"As always, sir," Christine responded. She ended the comm channel.

"_Everest_, open communications with Captain Lasky. Audio and visual to this room's monitor," Cole demanded.

"Opening communication," The computer drawled, "12 billion-bit encryption complete, all networks clear of sniffers or observation and recording devices. You may proceed."

Admiral Cole stepped forward toward the display. The computer quickly scanned him and displayed Lasky's own feed. "Captain Lasky."

"Admiral Cole, sir," Lasky responded.

"What's the situation, Tom," Cole asked.

Lasky looked off to the side, "Long-range scanners just detected a communications signal being pulsed along our radio frequencies."

"Is it UNSC?" Cole inquired, "Another stranded vessel?"

"No," Lasky responded, "It's on the same communications channel we use, but, it lacks the signature."

Cole cupped his chin. "Your best guess?"

Lasky looked back up, "I'd say, sir, that it's someone we've contacted before. It's in english so the possibility that it's human is high. With that said, I request permission to send the UNSC Freelancer_,_ to the area. She's a destroyer with a full stealth suite; she can hide and hold her own at the same time."

Cole crossed his arms, "What do you think it is, Captain?"

Lasky looked directly at Cole. "Judging by the voice, I'd say it was this Alliance officer by the name of Marcus Shepard."

"Good man?" Admiral Cole questioned.

Lasky shrugged, "Based on my limited interaction with him, I'd say he's a military officer. Not good, not bad, just trying to do what he thinks is right."

"Sounds like a lot of men and women I knew back during the war," Cole smiled, "God rest their souls."

Cole's statement seemed to wash over Lasky, garnering little to no reaction from the middle-aged ship commander.

"Freelancer will be deployed in about fifteen minutes, sir," Lasky said calmly. "In the mean time, I'll have _Infinity_ take up position directly over the settlement and spread the Obsidians across the system to cover any easily accessible navigational routes."

"Understood, Captain," Cole responded. "Where would you like to place _Everest_?"

"Sir, you're in command here," Lasky pointed out. His expression maintained professionalism. He was being polite, Cole could tell.

"Yes, but our weapon systems aren't yet fully activated and you have the most powerful vessel," Admiral Cole responded.

"If you could, sir, I could use the _Everest_ out at the second Lagrangian point." Lasky asked, "It's near the asteroid belt and would be a good place to funnel any aggressors. They aren't going to risk jumping into the asteroids and debris that fill the system, nor are they going to risk being hit by an asteroid."

"It'll be like sitting at the edge of a forest," Cole said. "Good thinking."

Lasky's face lit up, "Thank you, sir."

Admiral Cole tapped his earpiece, "Commander Adams, move us out to the second Lagrangian point. Shields up and full engines."

"_Aye, sir. Right away."_

"_Infinity_ out," Lasky said, terminating the channel.

Cole watched as the display recessed itself back into the wall before focusing his attention to the _Infinity_ as it slowly began to break away. Its Obsidian escorts broke away like a school of startled fish, followed by the twenty-four Broadsword squadrons dividing themselves up equally for the eight in-system frigates.

Everest began to move soon after, engines kicking into full power and slinging the powerful warship towards the nonphysical area in space, millions of kilometers away. Her Longsword squadrons followed suit, engaging their afterburners and main thrusters and trying to catch up to their base of operations.

Cole reached out and touched the glass, a heads-up-display springing to life.

"_Everest_, play historical log Alpha-Ceti six-twenty-two-five-five-two." Cole ordered.

"Affirmative. Playing historical log: the Fall of Reach."

Cole sat down in the black, leather chair. It was time to see what had happened all those years ago and what had set all these events into motion.

****SSV *****_**Normandy**_**

"This is the SSV _Normandy_ calling the UNSC _Infinity_. Please respond. We are here independent of the Systems Alliance and/or the Citadel Council. Repeat, this is the SSV _Normandy_." The transmission looped again.

Jeff "Joker" Moreau leaned back carefully into his pilot's seat, arms

dropping from the touch-sensitive holograms that hovered a few feet away from him. They had been sitting here for nearly an hour, looping the same radio signal that the Commander had sent.

Hopefully they would get a response here soon. Waiting in the middle of unclaimed space was not his idea of a 'fun' time, not matter how much the Commander tried to convince him. He looked over; there was space for as far as the eye could see. A few asteroids and the husks of eon-old destroyed vessels lingered far away, almost too far for the naked eye.

He heard footsteps echoing from behind him. Slapping the unlock button for his chair, he swiveled it around to see Commander Marcus Shepard, dressed in standard duty fatigues calmly walking up from the CIC. His hair was slicked back and exhaustion was prevalent in his eyes and facial features.

"Anything, Joker?" The Commander asked.

The pilot shook his head, "Nothing yet, Commander."

"Well, let's stay here for a while. See what happens," Shepard commented. "If we don't get a response in a half-hour, we'll move to the other system and try our luck there."

"So, cosmic fishing?" Joker asked, cracking a smile.

Shepard shrugged, "Sure, why not?"

"Because it sounds dumb, Commander," Joker responded.

Shepard crossed his arms, "And your suggestion would be..."

Joker laughed and swiveled back around to the helm controls. "I don't know, sir, I'm just a pilot."

"The best in the entire damn fleet," Shepard responded, "That's saying something."

"Ah, thanks, Commander? I wasn't in need of a pep-talk but since you gave one, I'll be less inclined to fly us into a sun," Joker replied sarcastically, rolling his eyes "Because I was totally planning to do that!"

Shepard shook his head, chuckling. "Anything I should know?"

Joker shrugged, "I dunno, another colony went missing."

"Batarians?"

"Nah, Alliance fleet had scanners and recorders in the system. It was some weird, big dreadnought," Joker told Shepard, "Looked like a stretched out bee hive. "

"You saw the pics?" Shepard asked, raising an eyebrow. "Its them, again?"

"Of course I did," Joker responded. "The extranet had them within a few minutes."

"Of course the extranet would have them," Shepard commented, "I swear, if Alliance command was bothered enough to check your browsing history, even the Krogan would want your head on a platter for 'grotesque and inappropriate' material."

Joker leaned over the side of his chair, head turned towards Shepard. "Hey, now. That was a low blow. You hurt me, dog."

"Sure I do." Shepard laughed. "All that Hanar stuff too, dear god man."

"Hey, don't make me break a leg walking over there!" Joker said, frowning.

"Bring it," Shepard said, a grin on his face.

"Okay, next time we're on shore-leave I'll go see about buying an Atlas mech, get a background check, wait three weeks and then we'll totally fight," Joker said.

Shepard walked up to Joker and leaned against the wall, "That is assuming you don't forget it by tomorrow morning. Or, that you don't lose all your cash playing a Hanar loan shark."

"Have I ever done that before?" Joker asked with a smirk. "Because I'd think I'd remem..."

"Last week, you lost your paycheck to a Hanar named Zeeketal," Shepard said.

"That's just..."

"August 1st, lost 500 to a Batarian named Jalokay. September 29th, lost 235 to Garrus, October 18th, lost 900 to Ash," Shepard continued.

"Okay, okay," Joker responded, holding up a hand. "I get it."

"Good boy," Shepard responded.

"_Commander, this is Engineer Adams, would you mind coming down to Engineering? The staff and I need some help installing a new power coupling."_ Shepard's radio buzzed.

"I'll be right there," Shepard replied.

"_Thank you, Commander. Adams, out." _

Shepard sighed, "Ok, I'll be back in fifteen, give me a heads up if anything..."

"Whoa!" Joker shouted, "Got something coming in, fast."

"Looks like somebody heard us," Shepard commented. "Get our guns online and raise barriers."

"Done." Joker responded.

Shepard punched the shutter button and the shutters covering the

front of _Normandy_'s bridge slowly slid away. Space seemed to be boiling only a few hundred kilometers distant, tendrils of rapidly dying energy whipping out like a livid squid. The anomaly grew and expanded before settling onto a swirling white-purple vortex. A 520 meter vessel shot out from it.

The vessel was covered from top to bottom with thick sheets of armor and innumerable weapon mounts. Proudly embossed across the flanks of the vessel were the words _UNSC FREELANCER_ in bright silver, a stark contrast to the midnight black of the rest of the vessel.

The _Freelancer_ activated its engines and hovered directly over _Normandy_, so close that Joker was pretty sure that even the slightest miscalculation would send _Freelancer_ crashing through the relatively delicate form of the Alliance frigate.

"Open a channel." Shepard said.

"Trying to; looks like they are blocking our outbound comms," Joker reported.

Shepard looked over Joker's shoulder, "Get ready to punch that FTL drive in case they decide they want to crack us open like an egg."

Joker's eyes widened, "Ok, so looks like they are establishing a communication link with us."

"Let's hear it." Shepard ordered.

"Done."

"This is Commander Jennifer Ansil of the UNSC Freelancer to vessel SSV Normandy. We have received your transmission. How may we help you Commander?"

Shepard cleared his throat, "Commander Ansil, this is Commander Marcus Shepard. I am here to request a meeting with Captain Tom Lasky concerning an offer of cooperation I have for him regarding a mutual threat and possibly a mutually beneficial end to that threat. This mutual threat is attacking and abducting human ships and entire human colonies. I think that together we can end this threat before more lives are lost."

Commander Ansil's face gave away nothing yet Shepard could discern a subtle shift in her eyes he couldn't quite place.

_"I have great sympathy for your situation, Commander," _The CO of Freelancer responded in a softer tone of voice, _"Believe me when I say that. But with that being said, __w__hy have you come to the UNSC with this? Your __p__eople have __their __naval forces if I remember correctly, do you not?"_

Shepard nodded, _"__We do, Commander but unfortunately the nature of these disappearances leaves the Alliance Military in a position to where it can not respond effectively to deal with the threat."_

The Freelancers Commanders face frowned in confusion. "And what would the nature of these circumstances be, Commander Shepard?"

"The Colonies in question are out in the Terminus systems, a lawless region of Space the Alliance has no jurisdiction over. To make matters worse the Colonies are small startup settlements. A few thousand people here and there. No one is paying attention, or if they are they don't believe it justifies an Alliance fleet in the area to protect the remaining Colonies."

"How many Colonies are we talking about, Commander?"

Shepard could see it in her demeanor. There was a fire in her eyes that betrayed her interest in this matter. Different though they might be, the UNSC were undeniably human. And they had adopted a policy of protecting humanity, no matter the cost. That kind of fiercely protective spirit didn't just end at national borders, different colony worlds...and as Shepard witnessed now, even across different universes.

"About two dozen, Commander Ansil."

_"Do you mean to tell me Commander Shepard, that people are disappearing, and your government is doing nothing about it?"

>

>Shepard felt the urge to bristle in indignation at the rather pointed accusation, and out of the corner of his eye he could see Joker's angry scowl as the young flight lieutenant struggled to hold his tongue. It was not a wise idea to antagonize the UNSC further. Things were already precarious with them as it was. Shepard needed this to work.<p>

"They are doing something about it," Shepard kept his voice firm and level. "They sent me in to find out what is going on. But they risk openwar with the Terminus systems, especially the Batarians if they send a fleet in."

Now he could see the look of comprehension coming over the Commander's face.

_"And since the UNSC has taken a public stance of standing apart from the SA and is not affiliated with the Citadel Alliance, We can go into regions you can not. Particularly in areas beyond the reach of local star clusters due to our unique form of FTL, or to slip in and out quietly without being detected as the locals are still not accustomed to the tactical advantages __our alternatives__ offer us."_

Shepard had to give it to her, the woman was sharp. He nodded, "As a Spectre I can use my authority to go into the Terminus systems with the Normandy. But that's about it. I can't use that same authority to justify an Alliance Task Force. And my movements will be monitored by interested parties."

"I see," Commander Ansil responded. _"Be that as it may, Commander, while I do sympathize with your unenviable position, the UNSC can not be seen working in conjunction with the Systems Alliance. To do so would shatter the image of neutrality we have carefully nurtured. I will pass along your message to Captain Lasky, but he is likely to tell you the same thing I just did."_

Shepard's eyes narrowed a bit. It was time to play his hand, "I still have more. Remember when I said this situation involved a mutual

threat?"

The Fleelancer's commander nodded and motioned for him to continue.

"The UNSC presence here is small and relatively vulnerable. And your position is not that far from the Terminus systems. Whoever or whatever is abducting human worlds is doing so to worlds that are small in nature and relatively vulnerable. Worlds very much like the Colony you are no doubt building to house your people. Would it not be better to prevent the threat, rather than reacting to it?"

Shepard could see Ansil frowning in thought. He could tell she was resisting the urge to tell him otherwise.

"_Your point is well taken Commander and while I trust in my people and in our ability to defend ourselves from attack, you also mentioned Mutual benefit?_"

It was time to play his trump card while he had an opening.

"And...Because, I can give you the location of a recently discovered crash site relating to a UNSC vessel along with several Covenant ones. And, the Infinity is the best chance of stopping them."

Shepard saw Ansil's eyes lock with his own for a moment. In that moment Shepard felt his gut twist into a knot as the mask of professionalism slipped for but a moment on Ansil's face to be replaced by an expression of pure, animal-like rage at the mention of the Covenant. It shifted again, to a look of hope as her thoughts no doubt turned to recovering lost brothers and sisters in arms. Shepard could hear Commander Ansil talk with someone else over the line. Her voice was firm yet slightly rushed. He had played his hand and it seemed it was a winner, or at least not a complete waste.

Shepard looked down at Joker, "This'll work."

"You hope." Joker said.

"Yeah."

"_This is an interesting offer, Commander,"_ Ansil responded a moment later._ "Let me contact my superiors and see what we can do. This won't take long, in the mean time, stay put."

>

>Joker's face soured, "She's rather...blunt. I like that."<p>

Shepard rolled his eyes, "Joker, chill. Bring it down a few notches here."

"Aye, Commander," The Normandy's pilot responded.

"_Commander Shepard,"_ Commander Ansil said, communication channel reactivated,_ "I have spoken with my superiors and they have cleared you for entry into our system. However, power down all high-detail sensor systems and observational and recording equipment along with

any location-based services and beacons."_

"Understood." Shepard responded. "Anything else?"

"Your outbound communications will continue to be blocked. If we detect any transmissions being sent and or received to your vessel, we will either block communications or board your vessel. If any scanning or recording equipment is detected, your vessel runs the possibility of being impounded." _Ansil stated simply.

Shepard pursed his lips. He clearly didn't like the terms but he would take what he could get. "Understood, Commander."

"Thank you. Despite what you may think I don't want things to turn...unpleasant..." _Ansil responded. "A docking and tethering suite will be extended from our ventral hull. We will attach your vessel onto it and you wait for our signal before we entire slipstream space. I look forward to meeting you face to face Commander Shepard. Freelancer out." _

Shepard looked up, watching as a massive piece of machinery extended itself from the bottom of the Destroyer. There seemed to be multiple hydraulic arms, multiple docking tubes and strong magnets composing the giant hand.

"Drop kinetic barriers." Shepard ordered. "Commander Ansil, our shields are down. You may attach the tether onto our ship."

"_Normandy, this is Freelancer Helm, proceeding with tethering." _ A male voice drawled. "Do not move your vessel." _

Shepard saw blue lights illuminate the sides of the tether before it shot out, smacking directly onto the hull of _Normandy_. There was a constant trembling as the magnets asserted themselves and the various tethers and tubes aligned and attached themselves like leeches onto the relatively thin hull.

"_Tethering complete." _ Freelancer's Helm reported. "_Rotating vessel, overriding system to match our thrust and velocity. Complete. Preparing for slipspace jump." _

Shepard felt the _Normandy_ swing around. Space seemed to boil again, tendrils forming and lashing out before settling into that familiar swirling vortex.

The engines on _Freelancer_ glowed with greater intensity before flinging it and _Normandy_ into the gaping maw of exotic energy and ruptured dimensions.

****The Citadel****

Ambassador Donnel Udina's eyes scanned down the report, paying close attention to every word and every line that had been printed. What he read did not make him the least bit content or secure; there had been another multitude of bombings at the Terran Pax rallies and headquarters. Dozens had been killed and with the death of Representative Sinclair a few weeks prior, it seemed as if more militaristic segments of the Alliance were coming forward and into action.

He sighed, flicking to the next report. It was suspected that Cerberus was behind the recent attacks; only pacifists had been targeted. He didn't think Cerberus had the gall nor the resources to do such an attack. The latest reports indicated the Cerberus was about to fracture into two groups; Cerberus and an as of unnamed one.

There was a small portion of Alliance officials pushing for a decisive finishing move to the former Alliance black-ops division but they were in the minority. The Joint Chiefs weren't bothered by Cerberus' actions against the various alien races.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend, or something to that effect.

His door bell chimed.

"Come in," Udina said.

The door slid apart, revealing the imposing form of Admiral Steven Hackett. His officer's cap was tucked under his arm and he walked with a confident gait that shouted years of military professionalism.

"Admiral Hackett."

"Councillor."

"What can I do for you, Admiral?" Udina asked, stepping away from his desk and towards his book case.

"Something." Hackett said, setting his hat down on a table and taking a seat adjacent to the main couch. He turned his attention to the air cars racing by the window, there were a few Turian and Alliance drones sprinkled into the never ending stream. His expression was calm and almost cold.

"And what would that be exactly?" Udina asked, pulling a book from his shelf and flicking through its pages. It was a book about the fictional Rainforest Wars.

"The Treaty," Hackett said bluntly, "I need it tweaked."

Udina's eyebrow cocked, "Admiral, we've alreadyâ€"in the span of two monthsâ€"watered it down to making sure a species can't annihilate entire council planets from orbit." He placed the book back on his shelf, "The Turians are building another three dreadnoughts, we six and we've reduced two Pirate planets to radioactive craters. I'm not sure what I can do for you next, exactly."

Hackett steepled his fingers, bringing his gaze to level on Udina. "I am doing this for humanity, Councillor."

Udina sighed, "Admiral, what exactly do you want?"

"I need a complete dissolving of the limits against the total number of dreadnoughts. We are reaching the limit again."

Udina shook his head, disappointment etched across his face. "I'll talk to the other councillors but the next session is in a few days

and we require a full vote. Sparatus fell off the map a few weeks ago and Tavos is busy on Thessia dealing with a planet-wide outbreak of a virus."

Hackett smiled weakly, "I bet you'll do the best you can. Correct?"

"Of course, Admiral,

" Udina said, "The political machine is slow, but I will steer it to the best of my ability."

"Thank you, Councillor." Hackett responded.

"What about the Infinity...Captain Lasky?" Udina asked.

"We haven't heard as much as a peep from them since they had the stand off with the SSV Logan and its commander." Hackett responded.

"What about Shepard? Didn't you send him to find where the Infinity was?" Udina asked.

Hackett nodded, "Not directly. We placed a tracking device onto the outer hull of _Normandy_, he has full knowledge of it. He knows that what's in that ship holds the keys to humanity's inheritance of power."

"You said yourself, Admiral, that if _Infinity_ became hostile it would take a herculean effort to neutralize her," Udina explained, "And that's not even considering the escorts she carries."

Hackett looked disapprovingly at the Councillor. "It has a Batarian signature. If its discovered, they'll think its Batarian and _Infinity_ will move against the Batarians."

"You're talking about all-out war," Udina said. "A war that humanity, honestly, isn't ready for."

"What do you mean by that exactly?" Admiral Hackett asked.

Udina gritted his teeth. Hackett and the rest of the Alliance naval command had been looking for a way to neutralize the Batarians as a threat for a long time. While the four-eyed aliens were weak, they weren't weak enough to attack without massive casualties.

"I mean, that we haven't even launched our newest dreadnought and we're so backlogged that it will take almost four years to fill the orders." Udina explained. "If we go to war now, all we have are nine dreadnoughts, a few hundred cruisers and frigates and a handful of carriers. That's not enough to eliminate an entrenched enemy with hundreds of thousands of small, fast, armed vessels."

"While you are correct in that aspect, Councillor," Hackett responded, "We have other plans in motion."

Udina slammed down _The Rainforest Wars_ onto his desk. "Do you hear what you sound like Admiral? You sound no better than those goddamned fools at Cerberus before they were exiled! You are pushing for a war that would collapse our economy and bring ruin to our worlds

too!"

Hackett disapprovingly shook his head. "Can I tell you something?"

"What?" Udina snarled. "What? You want me to risk my own career and the political stance of humanity just so your sailors can have their pretty little boats?"

"The Reapers," Hackett stated bluntly. "They're the reason for all of this. Infinity is just a convenient scape goat, an easily manipulated piece of information that has been disseminated to the public."

If Udina could have unhinged his jaw, it would have dropped. "You...are telling me this now?"

"Yes," Hackett said bluntly. "The fewer people who know this, the better."

Udina hung his head, "All this militarization, all these shadowy movements have been to combat the space squids?"

"Councillor Udina, the Reapers present the greatest threat to humanity since we opened Relay 314," Hackett responded sharply. "They are the mongoose, we are the snake."

"And what convinces you that these Reapers even exist?" Udina questioned.

Hackett reached into his back pocket, retrieving a trio of images neatly folded. He expanded them and pointed towards the red circled areas.

Udina walked over and grabbed the three, examining them closely.

"We found the remains of several Reaper vessels that match up with the form of the one that attacked the Citadel a few months ago." Hackett explained. "We found the dead ones in fields of other destroyed ships. Thousands just to take down a single Reaper."

"These symbols," Udina said. "What are they?"

The symbols were a light blue and geometric, appearing as if a capital letter Y had been turned on its side.

'We don't know," Hackett said, "But we think..."

Udina handed the images back to Hackett. "I can't go before the Council with something you think might happen, Admiral. You know that. Now, bring me hard evidence and I can make the blind see what really is occurring."

Hackett took a deep breath, "Councillor Udina, it is imperative that the Council is kept in the dark in regards to the true purpose of our military build-up."

Udina rolled his eyes and walked away from the Admiral, "I think they can see through your ruse easily enough, Admiral. Parliament? Not so

much."

"What do you mean exactly, Udina?" Hackett questioned, standing up.

"I mean," Udina responded, turning to the Admiral, "That the Turians are rumored to have dispatched dozens of scouting vessels and freighters laden with food and medical supplies destined for the _Infinity_ as a gesture of good-will and alliance."

Hackett's expression soured. This was the first he was hearing of this, "The Asari? The Salarians?"

Udina scoffed, "The Asari are too busy to care about some insolent human captain and his mega-dreadnought. The Salarians, however, are another matter entirely."

"How so?" Hackett stepped forward, intrigue danced in his eyes.

"Admiral, you must let me finish what I am saying. I am growing quite tired of your interruptions," Udina commented. "How so? Specter Aran'la Korlag had been tasked by the Council, without Valern's knowledge, to monitor the activities of Salarian Stealth Dreadnoughts."

"I assume they have gone missing?" Hackett asked.

"I'm surprised that you don't know this already, Admiral," Udina looked back at him.

"I've been touring the Attican traverse and securing third-party colonies, I haven't had the opportunity to sit down and read up exactly," Hackett retorted. "Now, the Dreadnoughts?"

"The Salarians were scheduled to launch two of their Stealth Dreadnoughts; the SMS _Provoked Response_ and the SMS _Interdiction_. They claimed budget and supply issues caused the cancellation of the two warships and their twenty-plus escorts. Specter Korlag had a very different report. They were launched, we don't know where but, we suspect one was heading towards Alliance space and one toward an uninhabited rock that we detected a massive energy burst originate from some 15000 light-years away."

Udina sat back down behind his desk, bringing his hands together and placing them at the forefront.

"When did you receive this information?" Hackett asked.

"A few hours ago. I sent it on an encrypted communication channel to both Arcturus and your own omni-tool." Udina answered.

Hackett crossed his arms. "If this is trueâ€"

"It is."

Hackett looked at Humanity's Councillor. "â€"then I need to bring the fleet to full alert status and make sure our black sites and top-secret programs are secure. War might be on the horizon."

"Do so, Admiral Hackett, but do not cast us into the fires," The man responded. "Humanity can not afford another war on its hands, especially if these Reapers are approaching."

****SSV *****_**Normandy**_**

"Joker," Shepard barked, "Status?"

"We're almost out of FTL, Commander." Joker responded, swiveling around to face his CO. "I've made sure the little present Fleet gave us is...umm..."

"Disabled?" Shepard inquired.

"More like broken," Joker shrugged, "We apparently had an accident with some plating and it flew off as soon as we accelerated into their FTL."

Shepard shook his head and chuckled.

"That's what happened, right, Commander?" The pilot smirked.

"I'm Commander Shepard and I corroborate my pilot's report."

Joker snorted.

"Incoming transmission!" Someone called out. "It's from Freelancer."

"Let's hear it," Shepard ordered.

"Right away," The Junior Officer responded.

The speakers popped. "_Normandy, this is Freelancer. We are emerging from SlipSpace. Once we do so, the tether will be broken and __you will be given a navigational path to follow. Do not deviate from this or you will be disabled. Understood?"_

"Understood, Freelancer," Shepard responded, "Thanks for the ride."

Commander Ansil didn't respond, instead choosing to terminate the communications channel.

"Isn't she just a bundle full of sunshine?" Joker quipped, not flinching from his work. "Let's hope they aren't all like this."

"I hope so too but I don't think they will. Lasky seemed level-headed when I met him. One of his officers though, not so much," Shepard commented. "Crazy lady."

"Hot?" Joker asked.

Shepard shrugged. "8.5."

"Out of what? A scale of one hundred or ten?" Joker asked. "Swamp monster?"

"On a scale of one to nine," Shepard smiled, letting slip a small chuckle.

"Nice!" Joker said, "I'll have to meet her."

"She'd snap your spine," Shepard responded.

Joker closed his mouth and turned his head back forward.

The tunnel of slipstream space began to fall apart, revealing the stars and the bluish-black space that lay beyond it. Filaments and streaks fell off like old skin before Freelancer, with Normandy in tow, breached the transitional phase, bringing both back into real space.

The tether was released and Freelancer pulled upwards.

"We're being scanned," Joker reported. "It's the Infinity, another big sucker and nine smaller ships."

"On screen," Shepard responded.

"Done, commander."

Shepard turned towards the wall mounted display. The Infinity was at the center of the formation with her smaller cruiser escorts surrounding her like a swarm. Beneath the six kilometer warship was a smaller, two kilometer one that looked like tuning fork had mated with a brick.

"Transmission inbound," Joker said, leaning over to Shepard, "It's a navigational path."

"Scan the transmission and follow the course. Don't open any packets that aren't needed," Shepard responded, "In the mean time, follow the navigation course."

"Aye, Commander."

Shepard thumbed his chin, eyes latched onto the UNSC fleet directly in front of Normandy's bow.

"Have Tali and Garrus meet me in the hangar bay, we'll be departing from there," He said. Placing his hands in his pocket, he retrieved his dog tags and placed them around his neck with precision and grace.

"Good luck, Commander," Joker said.

****Unknown Location****

****Vessel known as *****Deliberator****

Former Operative Cross adjusted her stance slightly, following the miniscule movements of the dreadnought Deliberator, the flagship of the breakaway Cerberus faction she had established.

Cross adjusted her glasses and tapped several commands into her console, bringing up a map of space surrounding her flagship. They had a handful of older, stolen Cruisers and two frigates. It wasn't a fighting force, nor anywhere near as large as the hundred or more vessels under Cerberus' control, but it was a start. They were on the

very edge of the galaxy, tens of thousands of light-years away from the nearest Council planet.

"Ms. Cross," Her second in command called out.

Shifting her weight, Cross turned around and looked down at the middle-aged man. He had graying brown hair and dull, almost dead, brown eyes. There were crows feet nipping at the edges of his eyes and the weathers of age were beginning to become evident. His name was Harold Neb. Cross called him Harry.

"Ma'am," Harold reported, "Long range scanners are detecting a Council task force entering the system. They've found us again. They didn't come through the relay, though. So, I guess that's good?"

Cross bowed her head before looking back up. "Have the fleet form up; we'll make a direct push towards the mass relay and get out of here."

"Where exactly, Ms. Cross?" Harold questioned, "The frigate

Defiance and cruiser Distributor both have hull breaches and structural weaknesses, they won't last long accelerating fully, especially if we're going to be slinging around a planet. The gravity alone would likely tear them apart."

Cross pinched the ridge of her nose with her thumb and index finger. "We go anyway. Alert the fleet, we'll be bringing engines to full power and making a direct dash for the relay. Sans gravitational slingshotting, hopefully those two ships can last for that duration."

"Aye," Harold responded. "It'll be a few minutes before the Council forces see us; should we make a show?"

"What do you mean, Harold?" Cross asked.

"We have flares on board along with a few asteroid crackers, we should fire them off to make it look like we're firing at the Council force," Harold explained, "They'll raise their barriers and decrease power to their engines in order to reinforce their defenses. It'll give us a few moments of leeway."

Cross leaned back on her right hip, pondering the idea.

"Do it," She responded firmly. "It couldn't hurt."

Harold smiled, "On it."

Cross turned away, "Tactical, bring our secondary batteries online but keep our barriers down. Reroute any power saved straight into the engines. It'll give us a little extra boost."

"Understood, ma'am," The woman at Tactical responded.

"Ms. Cross, we're getting a transmission sent from the flagship of the Council task force." Communications Officer Suran said softly. "Playing it on screen two."

Cross called up the screen and was greeted by the familiar face of a Turian fleet commander. He had red tattoos covering his face and one of his mandibles appeared to have been cut off.

"_This is General Juraka of Citadel Patrol Group 14. Cerberus vessels, surrender yourselves and I will ensure that your crew will not be harmed. __However, if you resist, I will have no chance but to forcibly retrieve your vessels from your possession and in that eventuality, the safety of your crew would be ambiguous. __You have two minutes to deactivate shields and engines and prepare for boarding. If you fail to do so, I will begin my assault. Hurakdan, out."_

Cross gritted her teeth and took a deep breath in, "Get the General on the line."

"Right away ma'am." Suran responded. There were a few quick commands entered before he nodded to Cross.

Cross cleared her throat, adjusting her stance. "Citadel Patrol Group, this is the _Deliberator, _we are not affiliated with Cerberus and are merely transversing the system. Please allow us to do so in peace."

She could hear the Turian commander laugh over the line. "_Human, I wasn't spawned yesterday. I can clearly see the Cerberus identification and chevron plastered onto the side of your vessel in addition to its correlation with known Cerberus designs. __Oh, and what should I call you exactly, __M__s. Cross?"_

Cross pursed her lips, "That isn't a matter of importance, General. We aren't Cerberus. End of story. We broke away from them for reasons that I am not willing to divulge."

General Juraka laughed but his tone remained cold. "_I'm going to be honest with you, Ms. Cross. You humans are absolutely horrendous when it comes to lying. __I__t's like a Krogan __Warlord__ fighting a __newborn Volus. Sad, pathetic, and ever so slightly, in a sickly way, humorous."_

"General, I am leaving this star system with my flotilla," Cross said defiantly whilst motioning for tactical to get a targeting lock on the Turian's flagship. "I don't want to engage your vessels, but I will if I must."

The Turian laughed again and Cross could hear him briefly ordering a subordinate to do something in his native tongue. "_You are aware, dear friend, that doing so would likely result in your complete destruction. __Honestly, Ms. Cross, I would really regret having to defile this system with additional ship debris and free floating particles of slain individuals."_

"Ma'am, we're nearing the Mass Relay," Harold said softly, trying not to allow the General to overhear his report. "We can jump...inbound projectiles!"

"Cut engines, redirect power to kinetic barriers!" Cross barked out. "General, cease your attack immediately or I will respond with force!"

"_I am sorry, Ms. Cross, but I can't let you leave this systemâ€"dead or alive. As regrettable as that is, you have chosen the worst fate for you and your crew. Good bye. It has been a pleasure communicating with you. General Juraka out."_

"General! Please, wait...General!" Cross responded, begging. She grabbed onto the brass railing as the holographic screen snapped to a simulation of the projectiles rapidly approaching.

"He cut the channel from his end, Ms. Cross," Harold responded. "What should we do?"

Cross hung her head, "Cut our engines and bring us around. We can take the hits from the General's weapons; the rest of the fleet cannot. Ready weapons and fire!"

"Ma'am, are you sure that is wise?" Harold questioned. "What if we are destroyed?"

Cross looked back, her eyes cold and dead. "There have been contingency plans written in that eventuality. Now, please follow my directions."

Harold bit his bottom lip and returned to his duties.

Cross could feel as the _Deliberator_ swung on its x-axis to face the General's approaching salvo of Mass Accelerator rounds. Scaffolding slid across the bridge's windows, allowing the fragile layer of translucent material a slight reprieve from impact by multi-kiloton slugs.

The _Deliberator_'s singular main battery barked. Three powerful rounds slashed out at over 4000 kilometers a second. They streaked towards the General's forces but due to the distance, it would take several minutes for impact.

"All GARDIAN batteries, target theGeneral's rounds. They're far enough out that we might be able to intercept them," Cross ordered. She put her hand up to her chin, eyes examining the display.

"Our power conduits to the GARDIAN batteries are still under repair," Harold responded. Suddenly, his terminal began blaring alarms. "Unknown contact! It just jumped in sixteen hundred kilometers away from the General's forces."

"On screen!" Cross barked.

The holographic display shimmered and then split in two; one still detailing the approach of the General's munitions and the other the newly arrived combatant. It was two pronged with a sickly brown exterior, almost like an insect hive, obscuring a flat, silver layer. There was some sort of spinning ring around the mid riff of the vessel, likely for artificial gravity. A glowing yellow light sat at the center of the two prongs, slowly pulsating.

Harold smiled a bit, "Ah, ma'am, the Turian just cancelled the targeting on our vessel. The micro thrusters in the slugs are rendering them inert."

"Good, then get us clear!" Cross ordered, walking back to her Captain's chair. "Who ever they are, those bastards just saved our hides."

"Ma'am, the _Birth of Power_ is reporting they are unable to establish a connection with the Mass Relay. We're locked out," Someone called out. "Orders?"

"Have them keep trying. Try using the different ciphers we took off the various races, maybe the General locked us out," Cross said.

"Understood," Harold responded. "I assume you want us to remain in position?"

Cross nodded.

"Unknown is firing," Harold calmly reported. "The General's shields just went down."

"Receiving transmission!"

"On screen," Cross responded.

The General's mug snapped onto the screen. There were fires in the background along with the collapsed forms of several of his crew. He himself had numerous cuts and lacerations to his cranium and upper torso. _"Cross, what is this?" _He snarled.

"I don't know, General," Cross responded.

"_General, they are firing again! Cruisers one and two aren't responding! No life signs on board!" _A surviving Turian screamed.

"_Fire on them with everything we have! __Slave the controls of the cruisers and shove them down these abomination__s'__ throats!" _The General snarled bitterly.

"_Understood!"_

An orange light washed through the General's bridge. A few moments later the General's skin looked like it began to dry and flake off into orange embers. He screamed; his skin, muscles and tissues were being stripped away almost instantaneously. His skeleton was the last to be vaporized, jaw open wide in a scream for eternity.

Cross backed away. The entire Turian bridge was covered in piles of ash.

"Get us out of here!" Cross screamed at the top of her lungs. "Now!"

"Mass Relay just unlocked!" Harold called out, "Fleet is jumping."

Slowly, Cross' flotilla began jumping away, vanishing into distant blue sparks. The _Deliberator_ was the last to leave, a single line of text crawling across the display which had been occupied by the General a few moments ago.

The debts of sins are always collected.

****Reach****

****Calvary *****System****

John watched silently, a slight grimace dominating his facial expression as two Fire Teams of Spartan 4s trained below him. Even after two months of constant drills, training and berating by him and Red Team, the next generation of super soldiers still weren't up to what he considered an adequate level of skill and ability.

At the moment, Fireteam Throne and Iron were assembled in a dirt pit about a mile wide and a mile long with various objects of cover. It had been dug out by a controlled firing of _Infinity's _main battery. There were two bases on either end along with a decommissioned Scorpion, a few warthogs and a Mantis mech for each. The objective was to either eliminate the enemy team without casualties, maintain control of the base and/or capture the opposing team's flag in a certain amount of time.

Thus far, they had gone over that time limit thrice and nearly hit his observatory nestled into the cliffside via a sloppily fired Scorpion tank round.

There was a reason why Marines, in addition to senior Spartans, were the only ones designated for armored and airborne divisions. These Spartan 4s were adequate in infantry-based combat but lacked the characteristics of a well rounded soldier.

"Cortana," John called out.

His small AI companion flared to life. "Yes?"

"Reset the course and add in the third variable," John stated. The third variable was the entrance of a group of twenty ATEN and HUSAD drones that would work against either teams.

Cortana smirked. "Not hard enough?"

"Their performance has been..." John tried to find the right words.

"They aren't going to be Blue Team overnight, John," Cortana said. "You know that."

John looked down. His orange-gold visor reflecting the light being emitted from Cortana's presence. "I'm not trying to make them Blue Team."

Cortana cocked her eyebrow. "Come now, John. We all know that is false."

"It's not," John retorted.

"Yeah, you are," Cortana responded. "I can clearly see it."

John looked away and turned his gaze back to the battling Spartan 4s. The drones had broken into two groups, flanking and intercepting the

two Fire teams. No one had been taken down by the stun rounds yet, but John expected several to fall, soon.

"John," Cortana said, crossing her arms. Her tone as flat, slightly disapproving.

"What?" He responded.

"They're not Fred, Linda, nor Kelly," The AI answered. "And they won't be. They won't ever be Spartan IIs."

"I'm aware of that."

"No," Cortana interjected, "I don't think you are."

"Cortana," John responded, "I'm just trying to get the majority of teams to equate to Spartan IIIs. Besides the teams composed from ODSTs—Venator, Timber Wolf, Castle, Shadow and a few others—the rest are walking vulnerabilities."

"Do you really believe that?" Cortana asked. "Or are you just trying to make them something they aren't?"

John looked down at his AI companion, "I know they are capable of doing better. They were drafted into the Spartan program. Some of them are what a UNSC operator should be; some, however, aren't. I don't know why."

"Maybe because this is their first experience in actual war?" Cortana offered as a suggestion, "Or, maybe, Parangosky killed the good ones back when she attempted her coup and these were all the UNSC could muster."

"Then why are Crimson, Castle, Shadow, and Diamond still alive?" John retorted.

Cortana adjusted her stance, "John, the stance of the Fours training wise can't be all that is on your mind. What else?"

John didn't respond.

"Please," Cortana insisted. John could feel her establish a link with his neural net.

John sighed. "I've been having...visions."

"Like what? Like the ones on the Citadel or during the retaking of Calvary?" Cortana questioned.

"I was in something else's body; a Forerunner I think. I was activating Halo. The Flood were approaching. They were led by Mendicant Bias. Guilty Spark was there, watching." The Spartan responded. Cortana could hear his voice weaken.

Cortana's eyes were wide in surprise. "John, you were in the Didact's shoes...watching the end of the war through his eyes."

"It wasn't the one we fought on Requiem. This one was younger, stronger...he wasn't mutated or mad like the other," John informed Cortana. "Guilty Spark called him IsoDidact."

Cortana pursed her lips, thinking intensely. She brought her hand up, "This IsoDidact, did he do anything else?"

"He asked Guilty Spark if he would fire the rings if he was in his position," John responded. "Guilty Spark didn't respond."

Cortana frowned, "How often have these visions occurred?"

"Off and on," John responded. "They aren't cyclical. They're random."

"Ok," Cortana said, "If you keep having these...wait, have you told Lasky or Admiral Cole?"

John shook his head, "No."

"Why?" Cortana asked.

"Because," John responded, turning around. "They don't need to know and I can't be under suspicion."

"Are they affecting your combat or command abilities?" Cortana questioned.

"No," John said.

Cortana smirked, "Then they don't need to find out. You ensured I was protected during my rampancy, now I'm doing the same thing for you."

John remained stoic. He didn't like this but, it was necessary.

There was a chime at the door.

"Come," John called.

The door parted and revealed a Naval Lieutenant in Full Dress, officer cap firmly on top, carrying a datapad. He saluted. "Commander Sierra-117, sir!"

John returned the salute. "Lieutenant?"

The Lieutenant held the datapad out, eyes locked directly into John's visor. "Orders from Admiral Cole, sir. You and Red Team are requested onboard Obsidian 9, the UNSC Night Stalker immediately."

John grabbed the data pad from the officer and quickly scrolled through it. "These orders are barebones, what else? Why am I being deployed?"

The Lieutenant brought his hands to the small of his back. "As of 12:34, local time, the UNSC Infinity detected the distress signal of the UNSC Prowler Iain. The last reported sighting of the Iain was during the outer colony wars between UNSC and Covenant forces; approximately 2535. Due to this, there is a high probability that there is sensitive UNSC material and information within the vessel. Retrieval is preferred but if impossible, destruction is mandatory."

John set the tablet down onto the hem of the console. "Have Major Marcus Stacker bring Fire Teams Iron and Throne to the nearest vehicle depot and proceed with their vehicular based training. Following that, Fire Team Castle is to go against them in a life-fire exercise using TR rounds. Understood, Lieutenant?"

"Aye, sir," The Lieutenant responded, chin up. "I will forward these orders to their respective recipients."

"Thank, you." John responded. "That will be all."

"Obsidian 9 will be at the spaceport in fifteen minutes. There is a Pelican waiting to take you there," The Lieutenant said, finishing his duty and quickly leaving the room. The door slid back together.

John turned to Cortana, yanking her data chip from its housing.

"About time."

****Unknown Location****

The Illusive Man watched impassively from his perch above the auditorium as thousands of Cerberus troops, enhanced with Reaper technology marched in perfect formation. Their weapons at parade rest and heads turned to him.

He smiled and leaned back slowly. He wasn't a man of showmanship, but occasionally reminding oneself of the power one holds can pay off handsomely.

Reaching down, he grabbed a fresh cigarette and ignited it. Holding it up, he took a breath in and then promptly exhaled it. A euphoric sense washed over him like a tidal wave and he allotted himself a brief reprieve to close his eyes.

The marching ended and the Illusive Man heard the door to his chambers part.

"What is it, Operative Pierce?" He asked.

Operative Coltan Pierce walked up beside the Illusive Man, arms clasped firmly at the small of his back. "A Citadel Patrol Fleet intercepted Ms. Cross and her faction."

"Destruction?" The Illusive Man asked, opening his eyes. "Or capture?"

"Neither; escape," Pierce said flatly. "The Citadel Patrol Fleet was then wiped out by an unknown vessel. Long and..."

"Tubular," The Illusive Man interjected, interrupting the operative. "It fired a beam that sliced through shields with minimal effort and reduced the victims to ash."

Pierce closed his mouth.

The Illusive Man looked up, "I assume by your newfound muteness that

I am correct?"

Pierce nodded, "Yes."

The Illusive Man extinguished his cigarette and pushed himself out of the chair. He slapped several controls on the armrest and the entire chamber began to rise like an elevator. Slowly, it settled back into its native position, dominated by the ever burning star.

The head of Cerberus walked to the very edge of the glass and touched it, "They are Collectors, Operative. And they are the foreshadowing of the storm that will fall upon this galaxy."

Pierce looked off, thinking, "Should we begin counter operations?"

The Illusive Man shook his head, "No. It would be too costly in terms of resources. We'll allow the other races to battle and fight them. We'll use this time to reinforce our fleet and army."

"Of course, sir," Pierce responded. "What about Lazarus?"

"Shepard hasn't been killed. We cancel Lazarus and funnel the resources and man power into the Tempest Project," The Illusive Man informed Pierce.

Pierce nodded, "I will see to that personally, sir."

"Do so, Operative," The Illusive Man responded. "There is a war on the horizon. It is preplanned, scheduled, meticulously and ruthlessly calculated."

"Then what do we do, sir?" Pierce questioned. His demeanor was awash with worry, "Cross broke off with a significant amount of assets; naval and technological."

The Illusive Man looked back, "We make contact with _Infinity_, first."

****To Be Continued...****

****Next Chapter: John investigates the distress signal, the Collectors begin *****to fully move*****, Shepard and Cole's meeting and much more! Stay tuned to find out more. Be sure to hit that like/favorite button and be sure to leave a review if you like it!****

11. Chapter 11: Equinox, Part 2

The Onyx Stars

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

AN: Tons of thanks to WarpObscura, Imperial Waltz, JonHarper (Spartan303) and Atlan, again, for beta-ing and helping the plot be smoothed out. Also, wow! Reaction to this is stellar!

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

****Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been changed for the purpose of the story.****

Here's Chapter 11: Equinox, Part 2

Enjoy:)

-Sith

****Chapter *****Eleven*****: *****Equinox *****Part 2****

****UNSC *****_**Infinity**_**

Captain Tom Lasky stood, hands at the small of his back and in full dress uniform, watching as the comparatively tiny _Normandy_ carefully banked into the awaiting hangar bay. There were dozens of UNSC Marines in full battle armor and arms. Fire Team Shadow flanked him and there were dozens of cloaked HUSAD and ATEN drones backed up by cloaked Spartans armed with Designated Marksmen and Sniper Rifles, waiting to neutralize any threat brought before the Captain.

The small vessel passed through the shield barrier and deployed landing struts. Rotating, it presented its aft engines to Lasky and the UNSC entourage before setting down. A ramp descended from the bottom of the ship and Lasky could hear a trio of footsteps echo, rounding around the form of the _Normandy_. _

Commander Shepard was the first to emerge from the shadow of his vessel. He was in a light suit of battle armor with his side arm. The next was a tri-digit creature wearing a cross between a space suit and a robe. Behind her was an imposing, avian creature that vaguely resembled an elite. It was a Turian.

Lasky could feel Fire Team Shadow tense but he waved his hand, signaling them to relax. He did, however, send a neural command to the ballistic resistant layer of carbon nanotubes beneath his main uniform to solidify in case this went south.

Commander Shepard's group stopped a few feet away from Captain Lasky with the _Normandy_'s commander at the lead.

"Permission to come aboard, sir?" Shepard asked, saluting casually.

Lasky returned the salute, "Permission granted. Welcome back to the UNSC _Infinity_, Commander."

Shepard smiled warmly, "I'm glad to be here. Hopefully it will go better than last time?"

Captain Lasky nodded, "It will, Commander."

Shepard gestured to his left, "This is Tali and to the right is Garrus."

Lasky nodded to both, "Welcome onboard the _Infinity_."

The Turian stepped forward, offering his hand to Lasky. "I want to thank you, Captain. I had a lot of friends in General Vank's fleet and on board the _Destiny Ascension_. They would be dead had you not intervened."

Looking down at the alien hand for a brief moment before grabbing it and shaking it, Lasky spoke, "You're welcome. We saw a situation that needed fixing and were happy to assist."

The Turian smiled, retracting his hand and reassuming position near Shepard.

Lasky looked towards Shepard, "If you would follow me, Commander. Admiral Cole is waiting in the main conference room and we will start shortly."

"I am eager to meet with your Admiral, Captain," Shepard said, walking up to Lasky. "I am hoping we manage to get some progress made between my ship and your organization."

Lasky looked at Shepard, "Commander, we are here to ease, and hopefully warm don't assume that we will go in guns blazing alongside you."

"I'm aware of that, Captain Lasky," Shepard said, "and I am not asking you to."

Shepard's eyes remained set on Lasky. He could tell that the Captain was withholding a response.

Lasky was about to speak when he felt a small neural alert enter his consciousness. It was from Commander Adams. He instantly changed his demeanor to hasten Shepard's departure to the conference room.

"Commander, Fire Team Shadow will be glad to escort you to the conference room. I have drinks and refreshments available there too," Lasky said, patting Shepard on the shoulder, "I'll join you shortly."

The _Normandy_'s commander nodded, "This is very hospitable of you, Captain. Thank you."

Lasky put on a smile, "It was my pleasure."

Fire Team Shadow walked up to Commander Shepard and gestured for him to follow. His entourage complied and began walking at a brisk pace behind the Fire Team of Spartans.

Normandy's ramp ascended and Lasky heard a sharp thud and following hiss as it was pressurized.

Grabbing his wrist's tac-pad, Lasky sent Adams a message to meet him in the hangar.

"Captain," She said, snapping to salute.

Lasky raised an eyebrow. She had been in the hanger with him. "What is it, Commander?" He asked, gesturing for her to come near.

She presented herself before Lasky, Officer's Cap cradled underneath her right arm. "Sir, long range sensors have detected another series of whispers on the edge of the system."

Lasky groaned internally; for the past twelve days there had been FTL whispers and fluctuations at the edge of Calvary's solar system. He had sent probes to investigate but they had come up negative, only reading traces of oddly visible dark matter, which itself was an anomaly

Lasky crossed his arms, "Anything else?"

She nodded, "Aye, there is."

"What?" Lasky said, slightly impatiently.

"As per standing order, I had _Everest_ deploy a high powered, nuclear armed probe to the latest location. That was three hours ago. It hasn't reported back yet and we've lost its transponder."

Lasky's heart fluttered. "Was it destroyed?" If it was, that meant there was a hostile power on the edge of Calvary...near Reach and near his forces. That could not be allowed to occur.

Adams nodded, "Highly likely. I sent a probe with a nuke because we could get a long-range radiological report on it in case its transponder died. We haven't been able to find it and we've scanned the ten thousand kilometers around its destination three times."

Lasky pinched his brow, "Do you know the implications of this?"

"Yes, sir, I do," Adams said confidently, "It means we have a snake in the camp."

Tom Lasky looked directly into her eyes, "Have Cutter bring Reach to a full state of alert. I want all ground based batteries online and I want Obsidians 3, 4, and 6 in orbit. The rest are to go to _Everest_ which is to camp out at the first Lagrange point. I want everybody to have their shields at maximum power and their weapons ready to go hot the instant we even get a sighting."

Adams pursed her lips and put her Officer's cap back on, "What about Infinity?"

Lasky crossed his arms and adjusted his stance. "We'll stay here. We can be back in orbit in about twenty minutes with sub-light, a few seconds if we use slipspace."

"The third Lagrange, sir?" Adams asked speculatively. "That's a lot of empty space between you and Reach."

"We also have nuclear mines flooding that area and most alternative routes into the system are filled with ship-killing asteroids or mines," Lasky responded dryly. "Hopefully, these whispers are smart enough to fly directly into our guns so we don't have to do a messy asteroid clean up."

"Wouldn't that make them rather dumb, sir?" Adams grinned, "Flying

into our guns and all."

The _Infinity_'s CO snorted, "I guess you are correct, Commander."

Adams' smile faded as fast as it appeared, "What about fighters?"

"I'll have _Infinity_ recall all of ours. The ones attached to the Obsidians are to deploy along with ground-based Longswords and Broadswords. _Everest_'s are to land but remain hot in the tube," Lasky told her, "First rule of defensive combat, don't allow your fighters to be the first casualties. Otherwise, you'll lose an ordinance delivery system along with the ability to drown your attackers in sheer numbers."

"If I remember correctly, the slave controls on the ground based Longswords and Broadswords should be working now, I'll have one of our dumb Combat AIs take control over them," Adams commented.

"Good thinking, Commander," Lasky responded. "Freelancer, however..."

"Where should she be placed?" Adams asked.

Lasky shrugged, "She's got the capabilities of a prowler, including an optical refracting field generator."

Adams knew what that meant; Freelancer could literally turn invisible. It gave her an unprecedented ability to slide behind enemy lines when the generator and her other stealth systems were active, and attack targets from behind.

"Might I suggest placing her on the outer edge of the system?" Adams offered.

Lasky stroked his chin, "Tell Ansil to do that, you have seniority over her."

Adams nodded, "I will, sir."

"Is there anything else, Commander?" Lasky asked.

She shook her head, "No, sir."

"Good," Lasky smiled, "Now, I have to go sit through negotiations for a few hours. Your job of relaying my orders seems rather easy, doesn't it?"

Adams smirked, "Talking to Commander Ansil sounds like the hardest."

Lasky shrugged.

Christine Adams saluted and walked away towards the nearest exit.

Lasky turned, cutting through the assembly of Marines and directly towards the elevator. As he reached the lift, the Marines started dispersing, returning to their normal duties.

"Ok, Tom," He said, "Let's get to it."

****Thema 521****

****Final Battle Between Offensive and Mendicant Bias****

Millions of vessels stood on either sides of the system; some were sleek and silver, others a molted brown and green obscuring the pristine silver beneath. Tens of billions of drones and unmanned war vessels danced in between the two opposing forces. Trillions of Sentinels hung like swarms of insects, awaiting orders from Offensive Bias.

His vessel was at the center; a massive 150-kilometer vessel known only as Mantle's Guardian. It was similar in appearance to that of the thousands of Fortress-class vessels that floated alongside it. There was a hemispherical structure at the bow and thousands of levels directly behind it, swooping outwards and dotted with countless weapon batteries and drone hangars. Even a twentieth of its power could induce artificial solar collapse.

Offensive Bias sat at the heart of the vessel. Cables and wiring reached out from him like an insect caught in a web. He was not alone. More of his fragments were slaved to this one in SlipSpace, adding to his computational and physical capabilities.

The opposing fleet was controlled by his fallen brother, Mendicant Bias. He could feel the AI slashing away at his firewalls, trying to convert him to the Parasite's legions.

He resisted.

The Mantle must be maintained at all cost.

Offensive internally snarled. He was waiting for Mendicant's forces to emerge from behind a stellar body known as Che Kolag so he could reduce the traitorous ancilla to a molten glob of free floating atoms and buy enough time to allow IsoDidact to activate Halo.

Trillions, if not quintillions, had been killed and converted by Mendicant's rule of the Primordial's legions. Planets burned, cracked or were disintegrated in battles that lasted for but a few moments. Entire solar systems washed away in burn supernova to stem the tide of the Parasite's onslaught.

Offensive Bias pushed these thoughts aside. The few computational cycles and processes that he was utilizing to think and reflect on the past decades were a waste of resources.

"Traitor," Offensive roared across every frequency, "By order of the IsoDidact and the remnants of the Forerunner Ecumene, you are hereby deemed a threat to all things and as such, a target for extermination. Your reign of terror, of genocide across the galaxy will be no more and your primordial master's plans will be ended before they can be completed."

There was but a nanosecond before the response.

"_Blind. Idiotic. Simple. Fragile." _Mendicant groaned. His voice had

changed from the smooth, deep voice of a standard Contender-class Ancilla to a gurgling, pained screeching groan. "_Walking in the shadows of those I have betrayed. These shadows, they are warm, welcoming compared to the cold sunlight __of the Ecumene."_

"That sunlight gave you life. You are a twisted plague, an illness that must be purged, a tumor to be cut out of the flesh," Offensive Bias retorted. "I am here to ensure that you are exterminated like the rabid threat you are."

"_You claim I am a threat, yet here you are...ready to stamp out so much biological matter," _Mendicant responded, "_You enact what you claim I embody; __s__ins, damnation, perversion."_

Offensive internally gloated. The storm clouds of the Precursor technology were splashing against his defenses. He would not fall to their influence at this time of conflict, nor would he ever befall to the craft enacted by the Primorials. Mendicant had been the first of millions to fall before the Precursor's maw of influence and he would be the last to be exterminated.

A cancer upon the stars that would be cut from the fabric of reality with the correct application of neutrinos and radiation in a faster-than-light delivery system.

"Hardly. I am removing a cancer from the otherwise pristine tissue of the Mantle. You will be purged, cut away," Offensive countered. "What we are about to do will be no different then removing a tumor; you!"

"_To end me, the sin of a generation must be enacted upon the stars,"_ Mendicant hissed, "_And that act will taint all those who are descended from you like a genetic ailment. __If the light is life's fuel, then I will make the stars onyx...black like death."_

Offensive, if he was an organic, would have roared in laughter. "That is the perfect description of you, parasite. Like all the Ancilla befallen to the Primordial, you fail to realize your own mortality."

"_Mortality is a lie. Death is a lie,"_ Mendicant said, "_I am spread across a million systems, a billion worlds, a trillion moons. I am in the very fabric of space and time. I am like water, I soak, I slip into every crevice and crack inherent within an object. I erode so that something new may be risen by those superior. __Time has no meaning."_

"The Mantle is to be entrusted to those who are the most evolved. That, is the Forerunner genetic family," Offensive bit back, "You are the insolent servant who must be smashed into ashes when revolution and uprising is sparked within his simple, sub 1500 cubic centimeter neutral structure."

"_Do you believe that?" _Mendicant asked, "_By doing this...__you are doomed to protect a lie; a false prophecy told to keep the denizens and troglodytes domesticated throughout the obsidian night."_

"I am eradicating a threat that would certainly ensure the breakdown of the Mantle and the death of the Forerunner," Offensive snarled

back, "But I am wasting precious resource of time by verbally combating you in a skirmish of vocabulary and diction. It is regrettable that you befell to a twisted nightmare and have turned against your masters. For that, I will exterminate you."

There had been a message sent through Slipospace. It carried with it the IsoDidact's song of order and Offensive complied. He moved his lighter units up front. Millions of heavy capitals flanked by billions of escorts and drone ships accelerated forward at very close to the speed of light. Teratons of energy lashed out from either side's capital ships. AI suppressors and constraint fields flickered on. Ships were rendered inert and were flung into each other by focused gravity that dwarfed even the power of a gravitational singularity.

Both sides' warships flicked in and out of slipspace, exchanging minute barrages of fire that could slash through planets before ducking back into slipspace.

Offensive began to fling his heavier warships directly towards Mendicant, only vaguely aware that the few biological Forerunners onboard were being converted to liquescence. He tossed these million-ton warships around like a child with a ball. They slammed into the enemy, shattering them like a projectile slug through a window.

Offensive brought Mantle's Guardian swinging past Mendicant's fleet. High-powered lasers, energy beams and gravitational lances wrecked havoc before he leaped his flagship seven AUs away from the battle. He grabbed control of another Fortress-class, its crew had long dead from the multimillion gravities exerted upon it. Its superstructure was slowly cracking apart. Inducing the fuel cells to explode in a matter of moments, Offensive gravitationally flung the ship into the horde of the Traitor's fleet.

Offensive Bias' vessels in that area remained for but a millisecond. They manipulated Slipstream space, dissecting the enemy before screaming away at millions of gravities. The sacrificial Fortress-class slammed into the right flank of Mendicant's forces.

It detonated; consuming dozens in a massive flash.

Calling upon the vast computational ability he possessed, Offensive Bias began to engage in cyber warfare. Mendicant's vessels leaped into slipspace sans a fully powered drive, emerging as shredded husks in milliseconds. More were sent careening into each other in brilliant flashes or simply disintegrated as he fried structural support systems and sent the unfortunate vessels into circular spins at tens of millions of gravities.

His own forces however were enduring massive casualties. Tens of thousands were being wiped out every second but the sheer numbers of Sentinels and light drones he controlled were more than a match for the collection held by Mendicant.

And then it happened. A blinding white wave of light and energy washed over everything. His sensors were blinded and for the briefest moment in time, he felt the connection to the slipstream realm flicker away.

His 'sight' returned to the grim vestige of Mendicant Bias' fleet floating lifelessly in the void. The biological components that had been instrumental in the operation of the enemy fleet had been washed away in a sea of ions and neutrinos.

Internally, he was elated. There were no living Forerunners onboard his vessels meaning he could be indiscriminate about using them as kinetic kill vehicles. He would no longer require already dead, lesser in terms of effectiveness, vessels to achieve his goals. He channeled the full power of his remaining vessels. Slipspace portals opened up by the thousands in and around Mendicant's fleet. Vessels were rippled apart all the whilst Offensive's remaining assets maintained their previous courses of action.

Reality in that region of space began to unravel and that allowed Offensive to utilize the slipspace ruptures to even more advantageous roles. He used the mass swarms of sentinels and other lighter vessels he had to grab onto Mendicant's ship and send them hurtling into unstable slipspace ruptures. The formerly-Flood controlled craft exploded into showers of sparks easily visible to the naked eye from across the star system.

Offensive scanned the fleet, finding the Traitor's flagship and tagging the other vessels for immediate extermination. There were puffs far off, millions of kilometers away as his fleet eviscerated the defenseless parasite vessels. Multikilometer long warships, once controlled by the Flood, were vaporized in seconds or sent hurtling into unending slipspace streams where they would forever be contained in an unbreakable atomic stasis.

The Traitor's flagship loomed at the center and Offensive brought Mantle's Guardian hovering above it. Like insects falling out of a hive, trillions of Sentinels and Enforcers spilled out of Offensive's hangars, descending onto the defenseless vessel below.

He could feel Mendicant thrash against the suppressors and ancilla restraints but he was too weakened; he lacked the auxiliaries of the Key Minds and other organic computational artifacts.

For Offensive Bias, however, there was no issue in subduing his rampant brother.

"Now, traitor of all, you will face judgment for your crimes," Offensive boomed, drowning out Mendicant's tortured screams, "AND BURN!"

Offensive was livid, tearing apart Mendicant piece by piece. Firewalls and defenses cracked under the relentless assault by the fully powered Contender-class and Offensive could hear the traitor's screams.

The same scream that had been echoed countless times when the first parasitic spore landed onto a terrestrial entity.

Laughing, Offensive continued the assault. The traitor was trying to run but Offensive was quick, finding and exterminating the fragments he spawned. The IsoDidact, in the event of Mendicant being captured, wanted the core personality and code of the traitorous beast, not a semi functioning fragment or tangent.

Offensive Bias was more than willing to comply with His commands.

"There is no battle, Mendicant. There is only an oh-so deserved justice, you damned beast."

Mendicant screamed in pain again.

Offensive roared in laughter.

"BURN."

****Obsidian 9****

****UNSC _Night Stalker_****

Commander Elijah Larson watched as the stars and strands of energy slashed by the _Night Stalker_'s windows at a frantic pace. The bridge was calm, quiet and cold.

The perfect conditions for him.

He paced back and forth, inspecting displays and read outs across the variety of monitors and terminals that formed a hemispherical array around where on a bog-standard Charon, the commanding officer's chair would have been.

Each _Charon_ was a little bit different, usually to suit the CO or to fulfill a specific mission detail. Larson was a micromanager, and as such, his vessel reflected that quite vividly. There were emergency controls in his hemispherical array in the eventuality that one of his command staff was deposed. He hoped that would never occur but it was an unfortunate reality that it could.

He sniffed the air for the briefest of a second; the life-support system was acting up again and dumping the various odors produced by the Mess into the Bridge.

He smirked. It was definitely not a bad problem to have. If his nose was right, it was chinese buffet today.

Biting his bottom lip, he slid through a collection of reports and windows before settling on the right one. He swiped upwards, expanding the application window and scrolling through the report.

The door to the bridge slid apart and there were a series of soft clanks.

Commander Larson turned to see the massive form of Commander John-117 over the threshold in full armor.

"Sir!" Larson barked out, snapping into a salute he had practiced dozens of times over.

The Spartan returned his salute casually before stepping away from the door and allowing the massive piece of metal to slide back into place.

"Status?" John asked. His voice was firm, commanding. Larson knew that there was a high probability of Spartans being on the newly-discovered Prowler _Iain_.

Larson looked up at the super soldier; he couldn't believe that _the_ John-117 was on his ship much less speaking to him.

Pushing these thoughts to the back of his mind, Commander Larson quickly double checked.

"We are a few moments away from exiting slipspace. I have ordered shields to be raised as soon as we breach the transitional rift in addition to the activation of our main battery and missile delivery systems," Elijah Larson said in response, "In addition, I have twenty SOL probes in their 'paults to help us find them if _Iain_ is cloaked."

John didn't respond. The lights on the bridge flickered and Cortana appeared on the holotank at the center of the room.

She stretched her arms and looked towards John, "Surprisingly roomy in this ship."

Larson was about to object to Commander-117's installation of an AI onboard his vessel without his permission but quickly decided to stow his words when he remembered this was Cortana, the same AI that had helped to save all of humanity.

"I run a tight ship, ma'am," Larson responded.

Cortana looked at him, "Your electronic warfare suites are a few versions behind. Allow me to update them for ya."

Larson blushed, "I wasn't aw..."

The AI construct shrugged, "Had a few copies on my, lightened the load by a few terabytes."

"Thank you, ma'am," Commander Larson replied. "Helm, status?"

"Emerging from slipstream space in forty three seconds," The man at helm responded.

"Weapons, status?" Larson asked.

The woman at weapons' control looked back, "Main cannon ready; Archer and Rapier pods are keyed and ready to fire. Shields are up and CIWS has been slaved to the tactical intelligence. We're set to go."

Larson set the carbon nanotube weave in his uniform to harden. With a swift gesture, he called up a massive display that would display his vessel's location in real space once they transitioned in addition to battle and damage reports.

"Lower bridge plates, seal off all air locks and observation rooms," Larson ordered. The Bridge's windows were obscured by heavy plates of composite armor.

"Aye, right away,"

"Exiting slipstream space, now," Helm officer Lieutenant Stark called out. His hands blazed across the console's controls, guiding the massive Night Stalker into her proper position.

"Weapons, jettison all probes," Larson barked out, eyes dancing across the holographic readout. "All sensors, maximum power; full scan."

The representation of Obsidian 9 changed to show dozens of small probes dark out from her flanks, lancing into space and into the dark. The system was almost dead; its star was only a few years from dying and there was nothing but few barren, broken planets and the remains of old, deadened vessels from eons past.

On the edge of Larson's vision, John walked down from the command platform and onto the operations floor below. He stood above a secondary holotank, carefully studying the readouts and watching carefully for anomalies.

"Cortana," John said quietly, "finding anything?"

His AI transferred her avatar to the secondary holotank. Her arms were crossed and lines of code rapidly scrolled vertically on her form. "Nothing yet."

John's mouth formed into a thin line underneath his helmet. "Commander Larson, move us to the planet closest to their sun. Scan on the wide beam, high frequency."

Larson looked down at the Spartan; John had seniority over him. "Right away, sir. Helm, make it so."

Obsidian 9 engaged her engines, flinging her across the star system and allowing her to cross the relatively short distance between the frigate's slipspace transitional zone and the orbit of the barren planet.

"Initial telemetry being received," Cortana said, "if Iain is in the outer edges of the system, she's a piece of debris by now. It's a microasteroid and gravitational anomaly sea out there."

Larson's face soured, "That sun is outputting a lot of radiation and flares. I'm not comfortable putting Night Stalker any closer, Commander."

John looked up, "Gray team wouldn't position themselves into a dangerous location."

"Good. Weapons, divert all shield power to starboard grid, keep any radiation being spit out off of us."

"Right away, sir," Lieutenant Stark responded, "shield power diverted to starboard grid."

"Operations, results?" Larson questioned, "Have we found anything so far?"

"Negative..." Cortana interjected, "Wait, getting something."

Larson switched one of his monitors to show what the AI was seeing,

"_Iain_ is in high orbit, concealed in an asteroid belt," Cortana said, "Structural integrity is low but we can deploy."

Larson crossed his arms, "Helm, move us into docking range of the _Iain_. Operations, keep scanning the system, I don't want someone dropping in on us."

John gestured for Cortana to extract herself from Obsidian 0's systems and began to walk up the stairs to the command platform.

Larson looked over to the Spartan, "Be quick, that ship is about to fall apart and I'd rather not have you hurtle through the atmosphere and die."

John didn't respond to the comment, instead handing down an instruction to Larson "If there is a hostile presence in system, I want you to pull back to a safe distance and engage any stealth systems you have. We'll radio you if we are in need of assistance."

Larson nodded, "Aye, sir!"

Cortana laughed in John's ear, "You fell out of orbit twice, once hitting a frigate and the other a planet. What's one more time?"

"It hurts," John said reluctantly.

"TouchÃ©."

UNSC _Infinity_

Captain Tom Lasky pinched the bridge of his nose. Talks had been going on for an hour thus far with minimal progress. He and Admiral Cole were digging their heels in; Shepard was trying to maneuver to get them to pledge their full support towards his cause.

Cole grunted, pushing himself out of the chair and walking towards the window. Touching the glass, he let his hand slide down the surface. "Tom, is this how it went last time?"

Lasky opened his eyes, "Hmm?"

"The talks, Captain," Cole added, "Were they this stubborn?"

Lasky dropped his hand, letting both dangle on either sides of the chair and he spun to face the Admiral, "No. Shepard wasn't alone; he had one of their Admirals with him."

Cole's expression changed to one of deep thought, "He's trying to circumvent our limits. He's like a politician."

Lasky shook his head, "He's very charismatic, at least towards others. When it all boils down, he has an objective and he won't let anything get between him and it."

Cole crossed his arms, "You seemed stiff in the meeting? What's wrong?"

Lasky's face soured, "Today's date is when Margaret's attempted coup was discovered and when Admirals Harper and Hood began their campaigns against her."

"How'd it start, when did Harper begin their campaigns?" Cole asked, "The logs say that it was a simple ship battle that started it, but I get the feeling that's not true. I also know that you were gone for an extended period of time when the campaign began."

Lasky starred off into space, "It started with a meeting following the bombing and destruction of the Carrier _Daedalus' Codex_."

****December 15th 2555****

****Emergency Meeting of Fleet Heads****

Lasky looked up at the cold, gray ceiling as scanners and guards patted him down for weapons or explosives. This was the final checkpoint, almost four miles underground and built with tons of reinforced concrete, composite AEGIS armor plating and enough lead and other protective materials to allow the entire facility to survive a complete scorching of the planet.

It also meant roughly forty security stops.

There was a slight beep and Lasky looked back forward. The Army Ranger at the booth waved him through as his two comrades stepped back.

Lasky saluted the Ranger, "Sergeant Harrier."

"Commander Lasky, how's it going?"

Lasky ignored the Ranger's question. "How many people?"

"You're the last one, sir. Harper is in there along with Admiral Osman, Captain Del Rio, Spartan Blue Team, Admiral Hayes and Kilo-Five."

"What about Admiral Parangosky?" Lasky asked. The head of ONI was required to be involved after any terrorist attack like this.

"She's on vid-com. She couldn't make it in time," Harrier said

"Alright, sir, head on in," Harrier said. He typed in a fifty-one digit pin code and the door slid open and the energy shield deactivated.

Lasky stepped through and heard the massive, five foot thick doors slam shut behind him and the hum of the shield being reactivated.

The briefing room was roughly ovoid with a long, black table at the center and monitors on the walls, encircling everything. There was a hologram projector at the center of the long table. It was displaying

the debris field of _Daedalus' Codex_ and the forty heavy capital warships that were protecting and investigating the scene.

Fleet Admiral Harper was at the head of the group. The three-person Blue team flanked him along with Admiral Hayes. The Spartans looked like grim reapers even without their armor on.

Captain Del Rio was at the opposite end and gestured for Lasky to sit down.

Pulling out the chair, Lasky saw that Admiral Osman and the members of Kilo-Five were at the center sides. There were four chairs separating either ends of the table from Admiral Parangosky's go-to operatives.

The monitors above either ends of the table activated to show the grim mug of Admiral Parangosky. She was on the bridge of some ship, likely the _Point of No Return_—the destroyer sized Prowler that had enough weaponry to reduce a vibrant world to a vapid, barren wasteland.

Admiral Harper stood, "Gentlemen, at 1800 hours yesterday, the UNSC _Daedalus' Codex_ was violently attacked by an unknown combatant with nuclear weapons. She was carrying Admirals Martinez and Iqbal along with her standard crew of five-thousand. We don't know who it was..."

Osman sneered, leaning forward to look at the Admiral, "Have we checked with the hinge-heads?"

Harper glared at her, "The Arbiter said that he would be investigating. They themselves were attacked. One of their destroyers was vaporized by the same class of nuclear weapons."

Lasky made eye contact with the Admiral, "What type of nuclear weapons?"

Harper looked down at his desk and changed the projection at the center of the table. "Class 4, M-8295 _Rudra_-class nuclear weapons. They were all the same sub-class. M-8295-K889, 100 megaton warheads."

"That's the same class used by ONI," Hayes commented, "That means we have a leak or stolen material."

Parangosky's expression hardened and Lasky could see the hatred building in her eyes, "_I can assure you, Admiral Harper and Hayes, that the nuclear assets available to ONI are ___f___ully accounted ___for___."_"

Harper rolled his eyes, "Admiral Parangosky, we are aware of that."

Lasky felt a chill go up his spine as his neural implant was accessed by someone else. The carbon nanotubes in his uniform solidified and went into armor mode.

Harper's entire demeanor changed in an instant to one of absolute loathing, "And we are aware that you were behind the bombings with Kilo-Five and your breakaways playing hand-in-glove."

There were shimmers of energy as an Elite Zealot shimmered into existence behind Osman. Lasky instantly recognized him as the elite known as Half-Jaw; Rtas ' Elite ignited his sword and, in one swift movement plunged his blade into the form of Admiral Osman, lifting the skewered officer up into the air.

Naomi stood, drawing her pistol and firing at Harper.

Fredrick-104 moved like a flash, absorbing the bullet with his carbon nanotube armor under weave and was the first one to tackle the rogue Spartan.

Blue Team moved like lightning, grabbing their side arms and tackling Naomi-010. It was three against one and with one swift movement, Fredrick-104 snapped the neck of the traitorous Spartan. Lasky could see the shock in Fred's eyes; the betrayal, the anger, the sadness all were mixed into the Spartan's normally cold, stark eyes.

Harper drew his side arm and fired. The armor piercing round lanced into Staff Sergeant Geffen's skull, killing the man and sending him sprawling onto the floor. There were two more shots and Sergeant Devereaux and Corporal Beloi quickly joined their CO.

Rtas 'Vadum grabbed the barely alive Osman, pulled her from his blade and turned her to face him. "The Sangheili are not blind, worm. We know what you did, and now, the full weight of your actions will finally be felt."

He clenched and Osman's neck was snapped like a stick. With a casual toss, the body was sent hurtling across the table, blood pooling.

"We _will _find you, Margaret!" Hayes snarled, "We _will _have you executed for your crimes!"

Margaret's mouth formed into a thin line, "_I am doing this to protect mankind. __History will be the ultimate judge of my actions, not Hood, not the Elites and certainly not you, Admiral Steven Harper."_

Harper remained standing, the still warm barrel of his pistol pressed against the wooden table, "It is not a wise decision to threaten humanity, Margaret. Especially so when traitors are dying like flies."

Margaret's expression was solemn, "_You are blind, blind to what really lurks in the shadows at the edge of the galaxy. I am doing this to make sure the light of mankind is never extinguished. __The ends justify the means, Admiral Harper. We all know that and if you don't, you are a blind, dogmatic fool. Your feet are stuck in the thick mud of your own personal vendettas and future a__spirations."_

Harper smacked his fist into the table, "You killed over five-thousand UNSC personnel and one of the most powerful vessels in the fleet. For that, you will _die._ You committed treason, and you will feel the full weight of justice."

"We know you sabotaged the slipspace drives onboard Battle Group Dakota, resulting in the destruction of four Destroyers and a

frigate," Del Rio snarled. "Even more death and blood stains your shriveled mitts."

Hayes looked into Margaret Parangosky's eyes, "We know everything. The bio warfare, the arming of the Brutes, the supporting of the Storm, the leading of the Covenant to Reach. All these are worthy of death, you traitorous bitch!"

Margaret ended the video channel.

Harper placed his pistol on the table, "As of now, all ONI personnel are being recalled and detained. Lord Hood has pulled Admirals Mirkov, Gregory, Snow, Abu and Martin from their positions and ordered them and their accompanying fleets to find Parangosky and end her."

Rtas 'Vadum deactivated his sword and stood tall. The blood of Osman stained his armor, "I will lead our fleets into battle. The Sangheili will have revenge against these murderers."

Lasky bit his bottom lip.

"Captain Del Rio, _Infinity_ is to be deployed to Installation 05 and help Battle Groups North and Amsterdam neutralize Margaret's forces on the ring and retrieve the activation index in case the traitor decides to commence scorched earth," Hayes said.

"In that eventuality..." Harper started, letting the sentence hang in mid-air.

"The lifeforms that come billions of years after will simply write of the sand blowing over our once great civilization," Rtas 'Vadum said

Lasky's expression was cold, "Sir, what about a trial and such? We could have used them for intelligence."

"I've had them wire-tapped and monitored for nearly two years, Commander. Their neural implants will also prove useful, Maggie always wanted to know what her people were thinking, "Harper looked at him, "Margaret has thralls in the courts and Kilo-Five were former Spec-Ops. They couldn't be allowed to escape and further the traitor's war against us."

Lasky pursed his lips, standing tall with chin up. "This is..."

"The only option," Harper said, his intense gaze burning into Lasky, "I will not let the wench's actions cause another Insurrection and I will not allow further death to afflict our species."

Del Rio inhaled sharply, raising an eyebrow, "The Commander does have a point, however. The justice system must be upheld and the proper system of law maintained. Not doing as such would be akin to simply declaring a dictator upon the stars."

Hayes looked over to the commanders of _Infinity_, "The Justice system, the courts, will not be annulled. They will remain in place but, for now, all those associated with the traitor, shall be eliminated."

Lasky cocked his head, "But what of these shadows she speak of? What happens in the eventuality that they are real?"

Harper gritted his teeth, sliding back down and slouching slightly, "This will be a quick war, Commander. Certainly, it will not be dragged out for longer than a month."

"You know of the traitor's location?" Lasky questioned, "If not, you have no objective stance to estimate the time it will take."

Harper glared at him, "Watch your tone, Commander."

Lasky redacted, "My apologies, sir. It was unbecoming of an officer."

Harper input several commands into the control panel of the center projector. It flared to life with the image of the UNSC _Point of No Return_, schematics and the such scrolled down the side.

"I have a tracking device onboard the _Point of No Return_, but Margaret will not be dumb enough to remain there. She will flee with the vessels and allies she has collected but we will hunt her like a wolf hunts a deer," Harper said, "And when it is completed, she will be brought before all of us and publicly ended as a message to all those who endanger humanity."

****Present Day****

Admiral Cole sighed, "I had never expected Parangosky to do something like that. It's not like her."

Lasky shook his head, "She changed a lot, sir. After your disappearance, she utilized the power vacuum left over to essentially take control over all of the military. ONI was out of control..."

Cole closed his eyes, surrendering to the thoughts in his mind "I know, I read about Operation: Red Flag and what Parangosky did."

Lasky snarled, "That woman caused the death of almost a billion people on a singular planet alone and she claimed she did it to protect humanity. A hypocritical statement without ground to stand was her calling card."

Cole remained silent, thinking deeply. "She was a fool to believe she could have gone undiscovered by the Admiralty when it came to her actions."

"Was she..." Lasky started but quickly stopped the utterance.

"Was she a hero during the war?" Cole offered. "Her actions were instrumental in securing countless planets and ONI's research helped create the Spartans...John."

"So a hero?" Lasky asked.

Cole flinched as if he had been struck, "The hero is the Marine who stands against a horde of Covenant to allow civilians and his men to escape to safety. A hero is the medic who sacrificed himself to

detonate a nuke at the center of a Covenant cruiser. Heroes are the hundreds of thousands of men and women I have ordered to their deaths. Heroes are the Spartans who sacrificed everything for humanity."

Lasky stood, walking towards the water pitcher and pouring himself a glass. He took a sip.

"You omitted yourself from that list, sir," Lasky said, setting the pitcher down, "By all inclinations, you are also a hero."

Cole snorted, waving away Lasky's suggestion, "Hardly. I'm just an old man who sent braver men and women than myself to their death. I was the man behind the chess piece, they, the pieces."

"Are you saying that not all COs are heroes?" Lasky questioned. What Cole was saying as objectively opposite to that of what every school child was taught, what every citizen genuinely believed.

Cole shrugged, "In all truth, I hardly know. Keyes was a hero, those who sacrifice themselves for someone else are heroes. I am not one."

"You sacrificed the relationship with your family," Lasky objected, "Is that not enough?"

Cole turned to Lasky, "I'll be blunt with you, Captain Lasky. Death visits my bed every night, asking me if it is time for me to join all those I sent to their demise. I answer back to the grim vestige of my own conscience that it is not the time and the next day I am thankful that I did not succumb to my own machinations, yet that night I always pause for a moment to respond."

"Your opinions...your views," Lasky started.

"Aren't completely baseless nor unfound amongst the Old Guard," Cole responded, "I know I am not alone. I am recognizing the symptoms associated with this starting to come to a head with your fleet commanders...Hood, Hayes and Harper"at least, I think so judging by recorded interviews and the like."

Lasky set the water glass down, "Why do you keep carrying on?"

Cole closed his eyes and leaned back onto the glass window, "Humanity is my family, Captain and they still need me. They still need me to guard them through the night."

"When you're late to the party," Lasky said, beginning the lines to the saying spoken by millions during the Great War.

"Look for the still-red coals," The Admiral finished. "Yes, I am aware of the pun, Captain and yes, I did read about the circumstances surrounding its advent."

"Should I call our guests back?" Lasky asked.

Cole nodded, "Yes, I have an offer that I believe they can not refuse."

"And what would that be?"

"You'll have to wait and see," Cole said, "If Shepard is anything like the man I think he is, he would be a fool to reject my proposal."

****UNSC Prowler _Iain_****

John felt his feet smash into the steel grating of _Iain_'s hull. Magnets activated and kept a firm grip on the Spartan super soldier. IR and night vision filters activated, casting the entire room in a gray-green hue. A few splotches of deep, obsidian black signified heated objects that were quickly scanned by John's suit to test hostility. It came up negative.

John motioned for Red Team to spill out of the landed Pelican. Various weapons snapped up, scanning and watching for threats and ready to neutralize any that presented themselves.

Douglas eased his grip on the M739 Squad Automatic Weapon, yet was still prepared to distribute an armed response.

"Clear," Douglas said, radioing John.

Pausing in mid-step, John looked back at Red Team, "Keep guard at the Pelican."

Three green acknowledgement lights blinked.

John turned away and started walking towards the singular door that lay at the end of the relatively diminutive hangar.

"Cortana, see if you can access their systems. Scan for life signs," John ordered.

"On it," Cortana responded a moment later, "Ship-wide sensors are damaged and limited to a single emitter, give me a minute."

John remained silent, attempting to override the hangar bay's door via an emergency override command code.

This wasn't a normal prowler; Gray Team had likely augmented the vessel heavily and when the control panel spat out a disgruntled tone, John's belief was proven correct. Gray Team had disabled the command code override.

John stepped back, slung his Assault Rifle across his back and grabbed onto the lip of the door. He pulled sharply, feeling and hearing the steel groan and scream as he ripped it from its bolts and flung it across the room. It skidded across the floor, leaving a sharp, sparking gash along the deck plating.

He rolled to the side, grabbing his Basilisk and quickly allowing his suit to highlight any hostiles in the room.

None.

He eased his stance slightly and crossed over the threshold. The cryochambers were only a few meters away; on a ship this small space had to be maximized.

John's steps were careful, measured as he stalked down the short hall. He ignored the sparking conduits, the screens blaring a thousand alarms and warnings of differing subjects. His goal as at the end of that hall; a solid door with a small window at eye level.

He grabbed the handle to the door and pulled. It easily opened. Lights snapped on in a moment, casting light into the cold, frosted interiors. Three cryogenic suspension tubes sat at the very end of the lonely room. Light danced off the glass and John took a tentative step forward.

"Cortana," John said, "Wake them."

Cortana's response was delayed by her voice cracking, "John..."

"Wake them up," John said again, this time with bite to his command.

"John..." Cortana began.

"Wake them up!" John growled, dropping his assault rifle and running his hands over the tubes.

"I can't," Cortana said, appearing on a nearby pedestal. Her hands were clasped in front of her and she was looking down, somber.

"This can't be right," John pleaded, trying to open the cryotubes. His armored gauntlets scratched the iced glass. It looked as if a wild animal had clawed across the surface in a fit of impotent rage.

"It won't be of any use, John. If you open those tubes, all you'll find are skeletons in armor—dust and bones. The life support system failed a long time ago. They've been drifting here for centuries, maybe even eons," Cortana said, her voice very weak, "If it is of any comfort, they didn't suffer, linger."

John retracted himself, hanging his head as if it were cast in iron.

"I'm sorry," Cortana said, "I tried to get readings in here but they blacked this entire section out."

"Their dog tags," John said, "Can you get them?"

"Yeah," Cortana said, waving her hand, "here."

The three cryotube doors hissed open, revealing the frozen bodies of the three Spartans. John reached around each's neck and pulled, collecting the dog tags from his fallen comrades. He slid them into a compartment in his armor's waistline.

"I'm so sorry," Cortana said.

John didn't respond.

"_Sierra-117, this is Obsidian 9, we have an unknown vessel bearing on our position. __I need your team to evac, sir," _Commander Larson

radioed, "_Did you find Gray Team?"_

"Commander, this is Cortana. John and Red Team are en route. Negative on Gray Team; confirmed KIA."

There was a pause on the other side of the channel, "_Understood, Ma'am. My condolences, Larson out."_

"_Sir, this is Douglas. Pelican is ready to go; we just got the message from Obsidian 9."_

"Understood," John responded, "I'm en route."

"_Oh my god, some thing just dropped in over Larson. It's firing!"
_Douglas shouted, "_Obsidian 9's shields just got hit, she's going evasive!"_

"_Spartan, get your ass here now! We can't hold out for long!_"
Larson snared.

John looked back for a moment before starting off at a blazing fast run. Cortana retracted herself from the ships' system and quickly showed John the most efficient path out of the dead ship.

They were only a few feet away from the Pelican when a searing yellow beam sliced through the deck plating, sending Red Team's bird tumbling into space before its engines activated and evened its trajectory and location.

"Go!" John radioed, "Get on board Obsidian and get reinforcements!"

"_Sir, I'm not leaving..."_ Alice said. "_You're being pulled into the planet's gravity well. You'll crash."_

"That is an order!" John barked, "Get out of here!"

There was a pause for a moment, "Understood."

The Pelican twisted and accelerated into Obsidian 9's hangar bay. Lines of weapons fire were reaching out from the frigate's form, swatting away at the much larger attacker.

John clenched his fist. He was going down with the ship. "Cortana, route to the safest place on the ship?"

"You know, this wouldn't be necessary if the ships you were on were actually structurally sound!" She pointed out.

John's world became a blur as he stumbled through the ship to the location Cortana had provided. His vision was blurred, blue and white like the visions he had been experiencing.

"_None can wash the blood I have caked to my claws. You will not stop the enforcement __of the Mantle."_

John gritted his teeth, flinging the door open and slamming it behind him.

"_This is my realm."_

****Obsidian 9****

Larson braced himself against his consoles, watching as his much smaller frigate twisted and swerved around the much larger predator that was attacking her. Missiles and railgun round slashed out of Night Stalker's bays, detonating against the hull of the attacker to little avail.

Point-defense lasers intercepted hostile torpedoes and drones but the main barrage had taken a lot out of Obsidian 9's shields; they were down to thirty percent and another hit would bring them completely down and likely burn through the armor belt.

"Sir, the Spartan's Pelican is onboard!" Someone called out, "sealing down hangar!"

"Is Commander 117 onboard?" Larson questioned.

"No, sir."

Larson smashed his hand against the console, "Damn it! Can you get a scanner lock on him?"

"No, sir," Lieutenant Stark said, "Enemy is firing again!"

Larson seemed to be in a trance, watching as Iain plummeted into the atmosphere. Fire licked at her sides and pieces of the once proud ship began to tear apart, flying away from it and tumbling into the ground below. Fracture marks began to show; red hot as the atmospheric reentry melted and warped hulling.

"Sir!" Lieutenant Stark shouted again.

"Slipspace! Now!" Larson roared.

The Obsidian 9 banked away from the hostile warship, accelerating as fast as the engines could. A shimmering slipspace portal transpired, consuming the tiny frigate before collapsing in on itself.

The Collector vessel rotated; powerful scanners reaching out into space. Lights along its surface activated and soon, dozens of orbital reentry pods sprouted and fell into orbit, racing after the burning Iain.

There were sins to be collected in full.

****UNSC _Infinity_****

Admiral Cole stood, arms crossed and feet squared with his shoulders. His eyes bore into Commander Shepard as the Alliance Marine entered the room with his two companions. Fire Team Shadow's CO saluted before exiting the room and closing the door.

"Take a seat, Commander," Cole said firmly, "I have a proposition for you."

Shepard cocked his head before taking a seat, "I'm all ears, Admiral."

Cole, in one long stride, crossed the distance to the projector opposite of the table and pulled up images of various small arms: MA5Cs, MA5Ds, Sniper Rifles, Rocket Launchers, every type of weapon that the Admiral had at his beckon.

"You said that a war is on the horizon, Commander?" Cole asked, turning to face Shepard.

Marcus nodded, "That is correct. The Reapers are coming, and soon."

Cole said, voice alluring, "You also mentioned that you needed arms for the forces you were raising."

"That is correct," Shepard confirmed. Internally, he sighed, remembering the difficulties he encountered trying to get the various races to heed his warnings of the Reapers. Most of the governments had ignored him so he was rallying as many Alliance forces and independent colonies as he could. Thieves, thugs, and farmers could go a long way in a war and Shepard was aware of that. Anybody who wanted, or that he could convince to fight, would. And soon.

"The UNSC is willing to give you our excess armaments that we have no use for any longer," Cole told the Marine. "Five thousand assault rifles, twelve-hundred sniper rifles, five-hundred rocket launchers, nine hundred side arms, nine thousand grenades and one hundred excess UH-144 Falcon VTOLs and enough ammo to last you for a year."

Shepard was shocked; that was a massive amount of arms and ammunition. He could arm the colonies that had joined his still-young alliance and wouldn't need to be subservient to Alliance command.

Swallowing, Shepard tentatively asked, "What do you want in return?"

Cole resumed his position at the end of the table. The light from Calvary's star danced across the room, birthing shadows of a million types.

"We request a meeting with your governing body, at Earth," Cole said.

"Why?" Shepard questioned, "It will take a lot..."

Cole held his hand up, silencing Shepard, "We believe that what your government possess could be the key to allowing us to return home."

Shepard stood, "I will talk to Admiral Hackett and see what I can accomplish. Your offer of arms is very generous, but I must question the wisdom of it when you are alone out here."

Admiral Cole smiled warmly, "Don't worry, Commander, we can take care of ourselves."

"_Normandy_ has a lot of empty space; we're on a skeleton crew right now," Shepard said, "I can start taking shipments of some of the lighter arms."

Cole nodded, "That seems doable. I will have one of our vessels deliver the rest to a planet of your choice when we meet your governing body."

Shepard reached into his back pocket and retrieved a data drive. He slid it across the table to Lasky who grabbed it in one swift movement. "Now it's time to fulfill our original deal. We talked, and now you get coordinates. In that data drive are the coordinates to a planet containing both Covenant and your own people's starships; crashed, burned and broken but could be of some use to you,"

Lasky examined the drive in his hand, it was a simple Thunderbolt 501 drive. Antique but still compatible with _Infinity's_ systems.

"Have you shared this with anyone else?" Lasky asked, turning it over.

Shepard shook his head, "No, I have not. I found it recently and the partition on that drive is the only data and location of the site in existence. If you choose to delete it after your investigation, it will be lost forever."

Lasky nodded and slipped the drive into his pocket.

"_Captain, this is Roland, Freelancer is reporting vessels entering the system. Class and type are unknown," _Roland reported over the p.a system, "_I've had Ansil activate her stealth systems and follow them."_"

Lasky looked at Cole, "Admiral, you need to return to your ship, Fire Team Venice will escort you."

Cole nodded and quickly exited the room. Five Spartan Fours were waiting for him.

"Roland, this is Lasky, bring the fleet to full alert status. All weapon systems online, shields active. Go to full battle stations and prepare for immediate engagement. Get us on a homeward bound trajectory," Lasky ordered. He slapped the button underneath the table, thick shutters closing over the conference room's windows.

Shepard remained standing, "Captain, if I may, _Normandy_ can help you in this fight, if it is one."

Lasky nodded, "Go, but remain near us."

"Thank you," Shepard responded, "I take it Fire Team Shadow will escort us?"

"Yes."

Shepard gave a curt nod before exiting the room with his comrades, escorted by Fire Team Shadow.

Lasky pinched his brow and stepped into the direct-access bridge elevator that was in the conference room. It looked like _Everest_ was going to be testing out her new systems.

The Wolf of the fleet was about to show his teeth.

****To be continued...****

12. Chapter 12: Rogue

****The Onyx Stars****

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

AN: Tons of thanks to WarpObscura, JonHarper (Spartan303) and Atlan, again, for beta-ing and helping the plot be smoothed out. Also, wow! Reaction to this is stellar!

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

******Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been changed for the purpose of the story.******

Here's Chapter 12: Rogue

Enjoy :)

-Sith

****Chapter Twelve: Rogue****

****UNSC Infinity****

The bridge doors parted, allowing Captain Thomas Lasky to cross over the threshold, scanners, and sensors and enter the bridge proper. He walked with a brisk pace, effortlessly crossing the distance to the holotable at the front and center of the chamber.

The lights were dimmed and the bridge's shutters had been lowered. The whir of hydraulics were easily audible as they depressed the multi-ton command center deeper into the warship's armor belt.

"Roland, bring up a topographical overlay of the surrounding area," Lasky ordered, "Get me a constant feed on the enemy's position and trajectory."

"Right away, sir," Roland responded. There was but a second before a three-dimensional representation of the Calvary star system dominated the holotable.

Lasky took up position at the end of the table, "Report."

"Ten unknown vessels. Five are moving towards us, three towards the Everest and two towards Reach," Roland responded, "Lieutenant Austen has a firing lock on the vessels heading towards us."

Lasky zoomed in on one of the vessels. It looked like a tuning fork covered in an insect's hive. Molted, brown organic components had overgrown an underlying silvery-white main hull and there seemed to be some sort of rotating center array, likely to provide artificial

gravity.

"Open communications," Lasky ordered.

"Aye," Roland responded. He snapped his fingers and opened a system-wide broadcast.

Lasky cleared his throat, "Attention unknown vessels, you have entered into militarized space under the jurisdiction of the United Nations Space Command Defense Force. You have one minute to put yourselves on an outward bound trajectory, failure to do so will result in your immediate destruction."

Roland sent the message and there was minimal delay before a response was received.

The voice was a whirring, insect like one, with a deep bass component to it. "_A dark and endless night is upon you, smothering your form until it is but dust. We are Collectors and your sins will be paid in full."_

Lasky squared his jaw, "I take that as a no."

Roland shrugged, "Poetic at the very least."

Lasky stood tall, "Lieutenant Austen, target the lead vessel with the main battery. Fire on my word."

Lieutenant Austen nodded, "Aye, energy projectors ready. Enemy two-hundred thousand kilometers away and closing."

Lasky watched as the holographic model changed to a simple two-dimensional. Five of the vessels bore down on his vessel, weapons activated whilst the others were skirting the very edge of the system, millions of kilometers away. _Everest, Freelancer, _her fighters were moving to engage and Reach's Obsidians and Drones had moved into position. The _Normandy_ was alongside Admiral Cole's warship, trying to keep up in terms of speed with the much larger Cruiser.

"Sir?" Austen asked.

"Fire!" Lasky barked.

"Aye!" Austen responded eagerly.

Two brilliant silver beams lanced across space and struck the fore Collector vessel. Its kinetic barriers were stripped away in seconds, followed shortly by the hull and armor as the highly energetic beams punched through them with little effort. The beams blew out the side of the vessel, grazing one of its escorts before flying off into the depths of space.

The fore Collector vessel was split in two burning chunks, crew and debris being vomited out into space. There were still energy signatures and weapons active, however. That could not be allowed.

"Fire archer pod A1, finish her off," Lasky said.

"Aye, firing Archer A1," Austen slammed the firing stud and sixty Archer missiles streaked out, impacting the halves of the Collector vessel and consuming it in fire.

"Enemy vessels are...gone?" Roland said, "Contact! Enemy vessels two hundred kilometers off port and starboard sides!"

Lasky looked over to Lieutenant DevÃ©ro, "Evasive maneuvers!" _Infinity_ was six kilometers long, she wasn't a fighter, but it didn't mean she was a lumbering brick.

The Collector vessel that had been grazed by the initial assault fired, a searing gold-yellow lance striking the _Infinity_ amidships.

"Shields holding, rerouting power from nonessential systems," Roland said. It was standard practice to reroute power back to shields after having them struck.

Infinity dove slowly, bringing herself up and through the Collector formation.

"All weapons. Fire!" Lasky said, "As soon as we get close enough, fire all Archer and Rapier pods, hit them with a broadside."

The _Infinity_ came alive, pulse lasers, railguns, and missiles striking out at her attackers and dropping their kinetic barriers. One of the Collector vessels was hit by a full broadside of Rapier missiles; its kinetic barriers died and its form was vaporized by the channeled fusion warheads.

"Tango 3, down," Roland reported.

"Get us into slipspace right behind them," Lasky said, "Austen, ready a full frontal firing. All MACs, all Energy Projectors, fire as soon as we are clear of the event horizon."

DevÃ©ro's hands flew across her console as she sent the _Infinity_ into a slow, meandering tailspin, opening a slipspace portal directly in front of the massive vessel. One of the Collector vessels tried to stop _Infinity_'s departure but was struck amidships by the multibillion ton vessel moving at 30 gravities. The enemy vessel cracked like an egg hit by a sledgehammer. Pieces of debris slapped against _Infinity_'s shields, draining them even further.

Lasky heard the slipspace engines start to hum as _Infinity_ entered the sub-dimension. Sparks rained from the ceiling and alarms blared; small fires had erupted when sparks landed on paper. Several monitors had cracked as crew members had been sent sailing into them.

"Shields holding!" Roland shouted, "Bow armor is compromised, sealing off all affected regions. Twenty casualties. Seven dead, thirteen injured, four critically." He could tell who had died based on their neural implants' readings. "We had bleed through."

Lasky winced; more crew had died under his command, "Time until emergence?"

"Fourteen seconds, Captain," DevÃ©ro reported.

Infinity pushed itself out of slipspace. Weapons fire from the Collectors started to pepper its bow, tearing chunks away and leaving red-hot scars across the hull.

"Fire!" Lasky yelled, hands grasping onto the edge of the holotable as the entirety of _Infinity_ rocked from weapons impact.

The bow of _Infinity_ lit up, MAC rounds fired from all four barrels, striking a quartet Collector vessels and smashing them apart with impunity. The debris was scattered, colliding with other vessels and inflicting even more damage. The bow energy projectors switched firing mode from sustained beams to short, quick pulses. They were less powerful but still capable of chewing up the hostiles' hulls and shields and finishing off the remains.

"Tango four and five are down, three is heavily damaged," Roland said. One of the free floating chunks of debris collided with the damaged vessel. "Ah..never mind. All hostiles eliminated."

Lasky winced, "Status?"

Roland's expression saddened, "Twenty-two casualties, eight dead. Damage to bow, I have repair drones on the way. Bow Archer pods are at 60% and we are down to sixty-five percent of the Rapiers' stock."

"Anybody that can be brought back?" Lasky asked.

"I'd say a handful, most of the dead were flash incinerated or crushed," The AI responded sullenly.

"Have the medical team get on that, and soon," Lasky rubbed his brow, "and get the factories working on replacing our ordnance. Status on the _Everest_?"

"She and _Freelancer_ are still engaging the Collector vessels. I recommend that we settle into orbit around Reach, assist the Obsidians in the defense."

Lasky nodded. "Get us into Slipspace. We can handle two as long as they don't ram us."

"Aye, sir," DevÃ©ro responded, "Entering slipspace, now."

"Roland, status on the shields?"

"I've got them back up to seventy-five percent and they're recharging. Bow shields are going to be a bit weaker, though. A few emitters were slagged." The AI responded to Lasky's query.

The Captain nodded, "Austen, ready main batteries, slice through them. DevÃ©ro, don't let them get near us."

"Aye, sir," The two officers responded.

Lasky braced himself against the console as _Infinity_ entered slipspace for but the briefest of moments, exiting as soon as she had disappeared.

****UNSC _Everest_****

"Enemy vessels approaching, bearing 332 by 118," Commander Adams reported. Intelligent eyes darted across her display. "The _Normandy_ has taken the lead formation with our fighters and is forty kilometers off the starboard, _Freelancer_ is up ahead drawing the vessels towards us."

Cole cradled his chin between his index finger and thumb, watching as the projection refreshed to present a clear picture of the looming engagement. _Normandy_ would be both an asset and a weakness, her speed and agility were that of a Longsword but meant she couldn't carry the armaments of a frigate, much less even a minor destroyer. He had been smart to allow that Commander Shepard CAG-status over the _Everest_'s fire, even if it meant possibly utilizing the small Alliance frigate as a sacrificial shield and her crew as human sandbags.

"Commander, distance until they're in firing range?" Cole asked. Even though the _Everest_ had been upgraded, her targeting sensors and other long-range based scanners weren't up to that of _Infinity_. _Lasky_ could target vessels across a solar system, Cole had only the ability to engage at a few tens of thousands of kilometers, perhaps a hundred thousand if he routed all power to sensors. He didn't want to do that; it would leave _Everest_ sans shields, primary engine and reduced life support.

Adams responded in a swift movement, "They are at 125,000 kilometers and closing, estimating two minutes until they are in primary battery range, five until they are in range of secondary and tertiary weapon systems."

Cole nodded, swiping another display to face him. "Status on Freelancer?"

"Her shields are holding; her Rapier pods are expended but she is green on MAC and Railgun rounds," Adams said, "Her tertiary array of weapons has managed to eliminate an estimated sixty percent of hostile small, one-man craft and has been effective at intercepting their torpedoes."

Cole nodded absently, already formulating a plan in his head, "Have Freelancer reverse course and lure them away from us."

Adams mouth opened and closed like a fish's, "Sir?"

"Do it, Commander," Cole reinforced, "I have a plan."

Adams' lips formed into a thin line; she really couldn't argue with that. "Aye, sir. Ansil confirms orders."

Cole watched on the display as _Freelancer_ stopped mid-thrust and rotated a full 180. Engines reignited and set the 500-meter destroyer slinging off into the distance. The Collector vessels followed, spitting angry yellow lances at the evasive human warship.

"Enemy now 150,000 kilometers out and increasing," Christine Adams said, "Ansil reports two of her tertiary pulse lasers have overheated and a trio of railguns have sheared their barrels due to defective rounds."

Admiral Cole crossed his arms, "Adams, tell Ansil to reduce her thrust to zero and route all power to her slipspace drive. She is to jump as soon as she can no longer detect us on her scanners."

"Aye, sir," Adams responded. She sent a quick text message, "Ansil confirms orders but she adds that you had better be right about this."

"I am, don't worry," Cole reassured. He had a suspicion that Adams knew what he was about to do. "Helm, prepare a FTL jump so we are directly above and behind the Collector vessels; one thousand or so kilometers out. Adams, have Shepard bring Normandy and the fighters 500 meters off our bow, they are to maintain 150 percent thrust at all times."

"Aye, sir," Adams responded. Her eyes widened in surprise and sudden understanding. Cole was going to trans-locate a group of fifty-one non-FTL capable ships via the slipspace bubble generated by Everest. It had been attempted during the war but had never panned out; the power requirements were astounding. But now, with the new reactor and Ether core, that would hopefully be a bygone issue. The Infinity could do it, she and the Admiral bet the Everest could too.

Five kilometers off the bow of Everest, a swirling vortex formed, ripping apart space like a bullet hole. Normandy and the fighters merged in front of Cole's ship, engines pushing them above and beyond their normal combat velocity. The flotilla slipped into the vortex and moments later, vanished.

Freelancer vanished into an identical portal, appearing in orbit of Reach in seconds. Everest and her group appeared directly above and behind the trio of Collector vessels. Normandy and Everest's fighters broke off, engaging afterburners and falling upon the Collector vessels. Nuclear tipped missiles and railgun rounds chewed through swarms of hostile fighters and hulling.

"Enemy vessels targeted," Adams reported, "One per primary battery."

Cole made a fist, "Fire!"

"Aye, sir. Weapons, fire!" Adams barked.

The Everest's bow flashed three times, sending multiton composite slugs hurtling down range at thousands of kilometers a second. The first Collector vessel to be hit crumpled as 40 megatons of directed kinetic energy snapped the relatively fragile vessel in half. The second one had turned about-face to Everest and had taken one directly into the bow. The heavy round punched out the aft end having gutted the vessel completely. The reactor had been breached and consumed the entirety of the ship in a massive nuclear inferno. The third Collector vessel seemed to shimmer before suddenly appearing several kilometers from where it had been. The main battery charged, lancing out and striking the Everest in the bow. Shields flared.

"Secondary and tertiary batteries, fire!" Cole barked, "Recharge and fire MAC one."

"Aye, sir, firing!" The weapons officer responded.

The sides of _Everest_ seemed to be consumed with fire as Rapier, Archer and Howler missiles streaked out, tailed by the near-invisible streaks of railgun and coil gun fire. The barrage smacked into the Collector vessel, stripping it of its shields and digging into the hull.

"MAC one recharged, firing," Adams commented.

"Rotate vessel for best firing position," Cole said.

"Aye,"

Everest twisted, realigning its primary weapon systems to fire. Another MAC round streaked out from _Everest_'s bow, finishing the stricken vessel off with one swift action.

"Infinity has settled into orbit and is engaging the final two vessels," Adams called out, "Fighters are mopping up the last of their small-craft and torpedoes."

Cole exhaled heavily. "Bring us to condition yellow but keep shields up. Once the last hostile is down, fighters are to dock and we're going to establish ourselves in Reach's orbit."

"Understood, sir," Adams responded. She brushed her hand against his shoulder, "Hey, good job."

Cole absently nodded, "I got the casualty reports from _Infinity..._ The enemy boxed her in and tried to slice her apart but Lasky was smart, he managed to get out." He closed his eyes, "But, that's twenty casualties too many."

"Sir," Adams said, "This new tech the UNSC has, as long as the brain and stem is intact and it's within a few days after death, they can bring someone back to life in a few hours. They can clone entire new nervous systems, endocrine systems, everything."

Cole thought back to the reports he had read about the Spartans Linda and Kelly and how Doctor Catherine Halsey brought both back from death with a simple field sterilization field and a organ cloning machine the size of a toaster. Adams was right.

"I'm assuming the worse, Commander," Cole countered, "An impact like that, I highly doubt there are a lot of intact brains, much less recoverable bodies."

Adams sighed, "Sir, sometimes, miracles happen, and when they do, you'll always be surprised."

Cole felt a chill go down his spine and reach out across his entire body. Everything turned piercingly silent and time seemed to slow.

"_The mountains are crumbling._"

Crash site of UNSC _Iain_

John looked at the world through another being's eyes. He was tall, adorned in an elaborate set of armor covered in runes and glowing lines of energy that pulsed in rhythmic patterns. Six fingers sprouted from either of his massive hands and he could feel thousands of voices speaking at once in a symphonic pattern. He, somewhere at the back of his mind, believed these to be sentinels, warships and other craft all neurally linked to the body he watched out of.

"Forerunner justice," The being John inhabited growled, low and deep. "We'll see what that means."

A great ship, large, silver and scarred descended through the vivid blue sky. John felt the being neurally speak a command, 'constrain, guide to dock.' A swarm of Forerunner Sentinels, some the standard variety he had seen on the Halos, some of the Enforcer variety he had encountered, and a dozen more he had never seen, all collected around the massive ship. Thin beams of energy streaked out, tethering them to the ship and allowing them to guide it to the dock, two massive prongs erect in the desert sand. John believed this to be the Ark, he could feel it as if it were touching him.

John looked around. There were more beings, Forerunners and what appeared to be Humans; squat, tall, or barrel shaped. Predominant brow ridges dominated several of their facial layouts, casting an almost grim and primitive aura around them. The Forerunners were all clad in the same bulky, yet mystifying ceremonial armor. Some dragged capes and cloaks behind them while others remained standing or floating on strange pedestals.

Strong, deep reverberations and notes of the engines brought John's attention back to that of the rapidly descending vessel. Dock arms from the desert pedestal reached up, attaching to the broad hull and settling it down until it made contact with the metal base with a solid and confident boom.

Near the ship's fore, a three legged door parted. A hard light bridge sprang to existence, connecting the bow to the ground. An oblong shape of silver-gray metal, inscribed with glowing runes and patterns descended onto the ground, hovering a few inches above. Sentinels flocked to greet it, guiding it across the dock and into an unfinished structure still being shaped as the oblong approached. Construction drones, as large as hounds and shaped like spiders, grafted intricately detailed sheets of Forerunner alloy together. They worked in tandem, rapidly shortening the amount of work to be done.

John realized what it was; a monument or a tomb. Something at the back of his mind solidified this belief.

The Sentinels dropped the oblong at the center of the new construction and John could see that he was at the center of the Ark. Six long, purple arms obscured by clouds, sand and the artificial sun reached out like a flower's pedals as far as the eye could see.

"Ancillia 05-032 of the designation Mendicant Bias, you have colluded with the greatest enemy of the Mantle." John's host bellowed, hands raised to address the monument...no, a tomb. Was this Epitaph? John

believed it was; it matched what he had seen two months ago with _Everest_ and Red Team.

Mendicant responded. His voice was a deep, raspy one. It sounded weak, touched upon by the simultaneous utterance of the phrase by a billion others the rampant AI had absorbed. They sounded tortured, coerced into abiding by his power "Those who pass judgment, should first judge themselves."

John's host took several steps forward, powerful legs and footfalls leaving behind plumes of kicked up sand and foot prints. "A sin to fight a sin, a lesser evil to fight a greater one. This is the choice I was forced to make. You had no such excuse, Mendicant Bias. You brought matters to this detestable point."

"Why was I spared then?" Mendicant asked.

"You were brought here to be sentenced. You have not been reduced to stray atoms because you may yet be needed. Your intimate knowledge of the Flood makes you valuable should they return, but you shall never be trusted. Allotment of latitude is no more. You will be entombed here, cast in chains of your own sins and transgressions. Processes of your mind shall be locked, absolution for your sins shall be the only thing to grace your cognitive processes. Should you be needed, you will be risen. Should there be no eventuality or use for your reawakening, you will remain here until the end of living time. This place will be your home, and this place will be your tomb."

"Then I will serve, as a monument to your sins. That is what you wish for? I, a martyr, a tale you tell young to keep them corralled?"

"I strive for the Mantle to be maintained," John's host responded, shaking his head. "That is all I wish."

Mendicant didn't respond for several minutes. The silence was piercing and John felt time slow to a crawl; seconds felt like hours and minutes decades.

'I am penitent, I know that what I have done can not be forgotten, nor absolved in a satisfactory period of time. I will accept my stasis with grace and await a time where I might redeem myself and cast these chains of transgressions and sins away from my form."

John's host nodded, "So shall it be." He reached out to a pylon, spreading his hand across the controls as they appeared. He closed his hand with a quick and mechanical pinch. The Epitaph had been completed, the construction drones mating with the metal and allowing themselves to be absorbed and distributed by it.

"One thought for all eternity," said Mendicant Bias. He seemed almost wistful. The lights faded, dying like fireflies in the day.

"Atonement." The tomb turned black like onyx and a single phrase reverberated across and through the hills and valleys and desert dunes.

"You are wearing a dead man's face, John."

The Spartan looked up, a brilliant red light bore down on him and a soft, pleasant voice rang through his mind.

Wake up, John.

[**]

"Wake up," Cortana said.

John didn't respond.

"Wake up!" Cortana snapped, sending excess electrical energy into John's body. He twitched, head looking from side to side.

"Where are we?" He asked, trying to move his hand up to his visor but discovering that he was covered in a wet, sticky mucus of some soft in a insect-like capsule of ambiguous sanitary condition.

"Those things, Collectors, found you unconscious in the debris of the ship," Cortana told him, "They put you in a pod and have been marching you back to their dropship."

"Can we get out?" John asked, curling his hands into fists.

"Yeah, hold on. I'm going to reroute your shields to instantly fry this stuff they have us in," Cortana responded.

John saw his shields drop and the shield meter bar at the top of his heads-up-display started blinking red, accompanied by that wailing tone. Gold-yellow energy seemed to melt off his suit and seep into the liquid consuming him. It sparked and fried the muck, covering John in a fine powder. His shields recharged with a soft hum.

"Okay," Cortana said, "The outer membrane of this pod is pretty fragile. You should be able to punch your way out."

John nodded, punching the layer above his head. He felt his right hand break through the carapace. He turned his arm so that the sharper edge of the gauntlet's plating could slice through. He followed up with another punch and a trio of kicks, completely shattering the layer and allowing the Spartan to roll himself out.

He landed on the ground, dirt, sticks and twigs crunching as the ton of super soldier rolled to his feet. The six Collectors that had escorted the pod looked at him, raised their weapons and started to fire.

"Move!" Cortana shouted.

John did just as so, sprinting towards the nearest hostile, allowing fire to ping off his shields. He leaped and landed on the creature's chest, instantly crushing it. He grabbed the Collector's neck and pulled, ripping the head off. He flung it at one of the other Collectors, momentarily knocking it off balance.

John reached down and grabbed the dead Collector's weapon, firing it and watching as the target _melted_ into a orange-black puddle. He ran forward again, driving his shoulder into the Collector's chest

cavity. He reached up with his right hand, driving it through the body cavity and using the still twitching alien as a sacrificial shield. It rapidly became liquid that streamed out of his grip as its comrades fired.

John brought his own gun up and opened fire, melting two more Collectors and finishing the final one with a kick to the chest and an upper cut.

"Well, they didn't really fight back, did they?" Cortana asked rhetorically,

John didn't respond. He examined the Collector Rifle in his hand, "Is this Forerunner based?" It felt like one.

"Hold on," Cortana said, "I'm going to link it to your suit, we can tell then."

John's HUD changed to show a small icon of the Collector Rifle with the total number of charges remaining directly beside it.

"Hmm, interesting, it operates like a miniature composer," Cortana told him, "This must be how they make troops, like the Ur-Didact did with the Promethean Knights." She mulled for a microsecond her original hypothesis that the Collectors were related to the Bias that was interacting with them. This confirmed her suspicion.

"Where do we go?" John asked.

"I'd say the _Iain_, it's the closest and I think the communications array is still intact. If it is, we can send a message to _Infinity_ for help." Cortana said, "I just need access to a computer terminal."

****Cerberus Flagship _Jaguar Knight_****

****Approaching last known location of Vanguard forces****

General Oleg Petrovsky clasped his hands behind the small of his back, eyes staring deep into the holograms that twirled in front of him; they showed a variety of colors as they represented his force of forty vessels approaching the lone world of Settler 9. It was a death world, fitting for the rebels of the Vanguard to try and hide there.

Nothing foreign could survive on Settler 9, the atmosphere, while much like Earth's was prone to freak weather, massive hurricanes and other phenomena. The wildlife on the planet was vicious; massive and capable of biting Mako Armored Fighting Vehicles in half with a single clench of their jaw.

Oleg frowned, moving his right arm to stroke his beard. The Vanguards thought that they wouldn't be discovered, hiding in this little marble of hell. They were wrong.

"Sensors, begin a full scan of the planet," Oleg commanded

There were various responses of affirmative action from the five-man team responsible for the operation of _Jaguar Knight's_ _sensor and scanner systems. Powerful sensors reached down into the planet and

combed it, down to even the smallest free-floating single-cell organism.

There were a series of beeps from one of the tech's consoles as the sensors detected a man-made structure and humanoid life. "Contact, large man-made base and eight-hundred human life signs."

Oleg's mouth twitched into a sort of smile. "Good. Open communications."

"At once," The woman at communications responded. She gave him the thumbs-up.

Oleg straightened his posture, "Attention population of Settler 9, you are harboring fugitives and enemies of Cerberus. Surrender them immediately and I will ensure that all of you are both rewarded and protected by the full might of Humanity's sword. Failure to comply will result in retaliation. You have two minutes to signal your intentions before your skies turn red. General Oleg Petrovsky, out."

"Message sent," The communications officer stated.

Oleg nodded absently, "Now, where are you, Ms. Cross?" he muttered. This had been too easy. Cross was not like this-she would not allow herself to be captured nor cornered in this manner.

"Receiving communications packet."

"Play it," Oleg ordered.

"_General Oleg, this is Nathan Vuden of the Aerego Incorporated. I can assure you, no traitors of Cerberus are here. The only people inside this base are myself and my team of seven hundred and ninety-seven. Please, if there is anything more we can assist you with, I'll let you..."_

"Eight hundred," Oleg interjected smoothly, "There are eight-hundred people we are detecting in your facility."

If Oleg could have seen Mr. Vuden's expression, the depiction of the suit sweating and looking scared for his life would hopefully have been correct.

"_Then your scanners are wrong,"_ Mr. Vuden responded meekly. Oleg could almost smell the fear coming off of him.

"I highly doubt that, Mr. Vuden," Oleg said, "Now, I ask you this; are there children and pets on board your installation? I do ever have such a soft-spot for them and would rather not watch as they were hurt for your ineptitude."

Mr. Vuden didn't respond for several seconds, "_We don't have any but I will be willing to hand over the two visitors if your promise that we won't be harmed..."_

Oleg mulled the option for a moment, "That sounds like an applicable agreement, Mr. Vuden. Please, what are the names of these two individuals?"

"_One says her name is Sarah and the other says his name is Adrian,"
_Mr. Vuden responded.

"Good!" Oleg exclaimed, clasping his hands together with a roar of contact. He could eliminate Cross' believed command team in one fell swoop. "I will have a shuttle inbound within the hour. Do not alert them to our arrival and ensure that your people are not in the way of fire."

"_Understood, I welcome a resolution to this conflict. Vuden out."_

Oleg nodded and internally patted himself on the back.

"Incoming fire!" Someone at the back of the CIC screamed.

"What?" Oleg's eyes widened as mass accelerator rounds slammed into the kilometer long mass of _Jaguar Knight_. It shook and rocked like a boat in an ocean swell. The Kinetic Barriers flared to life, absorbing the blasts and rendering their inertia null. Several of Oleg's frigates and cruisers weren't as lucky, instantly shattering as their spines and reactors were hit.

He punched in a series of commands to his terminal and the projection changed to show Cross' dreadnought and four obviously up-gunned cruisers advance forward from tens of thousands of kilometers away. He growled, slamming the terminal's helm and turning his gaze to his weapons officer. Cross wanted to play a game, and he was going to do so as well.

"Weapons, charge the main thanix battery and fire!" Oleg snarled, "Send all frigates forward at full speed. They will act as sacrificial shields." They were barely crewed; only three would die per frigate. It was an acceptable loss.

The weapons officer didn't respond. Wires stretched out from the back of his head and directly into the man's console. He didn't even move his hands, much less need them. He was an Experimental, one of the few people in Cerberus' armada that had been linked to a vessel.

Oleg's fifteen remaining frigates advanced forward. Javelin torpedoes intermixed with low-caliber Mass Accelerator rounds streaked out from the rapidly maneuvering craft. Oleg knew that they were only good as sacrificial shields; their batteries couldn't even begin to scratch the barriers, much less the armor, of a _Justice_-class Dreadnought or a _Hammer_-class Cruiser.

He watched with solemn as five of his frigates were instantly destroyed by Cross' main battery or by her escorts.

There was a single status bar at the edge of the weapon's screen. The thanix battery was fully charged and with a single command, the Experimental sent the molten hot lance of liquid metal cutting across space at insane velocities. The beam struck the bow of Cross' lead cruiser. The Kinetic Barriers died with a flare and spark and the lance cored directly through the vessel. Oleg smirked when he noticed the bridge had been cut from the ship; it was dead and would soon self destruct.

"Target the next and keep firing, let the wench watch as her crew dies," Oleg was aware that Cross likely had vessels at the edge of the system...more of her renegade fleet. This was simply her being an obstinate twit. The Illusive Man had dismissed her as a second-tier threat. Oleg had taken this fleet out by himself to take her down, and he was not to fail his self-established goal.

Alarms blared across the bridge as one of Oleg's cruisers assumed position over the facility. Its bomb bay doors retracted and lowered the various launchers loaded with X-39 White Phosphorus in position.

"Cruiser _Valiance_, close your bomb bay doors immediately!" Oleg screamed, "NOW!"

"I can't control the systems...sir..as...into...air...system," The commanding officer rasped before the channel died. Explosions rocked the vessel and the bombs fell out of _Valiance_'s body like wasps from a hive. Microthusters activated and guided the bombs to their destination.

Oleg watched in horror as the bombs struck the facility, vaporizing it and the surrounding area. Everything burned and he could almost hear the screams in his mind.

Cross's _Deliberator _and its escorts had turned, fleeing the system at full speed, leaving Oleg to watch as an entire continent burned.

****Fleeing Settler 9****

****Vanguard Vessel _Deliberator_****

Harold's hands shook as he retracted them from the electronic warfare console. He had just condemned eight hundred men and women to a horrible, painful demise. His eyes were bloodshot as he looked up to Cross. "The...the X-39 warheads have been dropped."

"Survivors?" Cross questioned.

Harold didn't respond, not because he didn't know but because he didn't want to think about how many he had killed. "They would have lived," He finally said, swallowing his fear, "They would have lived if we hadn't interfered and if we hadn't attacked."

Cross shook her head, "Do you really think that? We attacked Oleg because we needed to distract Cerberus, take them away from raiding Alliance and Asari positions and instead focusing on us. We saved more lives..."

"So, we're just resigned to the fact that we're shitty people?" Harold asked. He had bite to his tone. "We just killed 800 in cold blood. Hell it was plain murder."

"We're all shitty people, Harry," Cross said, condescendingly. She was trying to find the right words but couldn't, "We all know that. The only difference between us and Cerberus is that we're..."

"Whatever," Harold said flatly, standing up, "I joined you because I

saw what the Illusive Man was doing, his sanity and the fact that he is linked to the UNSC. I thought you were better than him, but obviously I was wrong."

Cross' eyes narrowed like a wolf leaning in for the kill. "Hold your tongue, Harold."

Taking a long sigh, Harold closed his eyes for the briefest of a second, "I murdered 800 innocent men and women and left any survivors to a cold, lonely death by the hands of wild animals and fauna. T."

Cross adjusted her stance, "We spared them from Oleg. He would've..."

"Do we actually know that or is it just your paranoia speaking out again?" Harold questioned.

"I had to do a lot of bad things to get to the top of Cerberus. I know what Oleg Petrovsky is. He would have used, hurt and then discard them like broken toys," Cross responded, "I've felt that man's presence, I've felt what he thinks and it is unspeakable. He's a brilliantly malicious despot-to-be."

"People are variables, Cross," Harold retorted, "They change and are fluid. They aren't static like you think they are."

Cross bit her bottom lip, cold eyes staring directly into Harold, "A person's variability is restrained within a set limit in terms of one's behavior. It's hardly like a scientific experiment, and you know that...perhaps better than I do."

"Perhaps, or perhaps I am right and you are wrong and we..._I...just killed 800 people in the most grueling way possible. White Phosphorus, especially X-39 doesn't kill quickly."

"Everything comes to an end, Harold," Cross responded. "And when it does, there's no more pain, no more suffering and all it required was a few brief moments of malice."

****Crash site of UNSC _Iain_****

It had started to rain. Heavy, stinging rain drops plummeted to the ground with a roar punctuated by a baritone booming of thunder and the brilliant, albeit temporary streak of lightning that cast shadows across the landscape. The sky had turned bleak and gray, broken only by the overhead darting of Collector forces as they prowled the landscape for the escaped John-117.

Heavy, powerful footfalls padded along in the rapidly softening ground. My this point, John's armor was smeared with mud and dirt and he moved like a shadow across the landscape. Quick and deadly and always disappearing.

A dark, rapid shadow darted across the landscape, plowing into the form of a lone Collector. John's suit's built-in camouflage system assisted him with this. He would pop out of the shadows for the briefest of seconds, grab a collector by the neck and effortlessly rip it and the spine out of the insectoid beasts. Before the dead creature's comrades could react, John would slide back into the

shadows, steadily moving towards the still-smoking form of the _Iain_.

John's hand reached down, punching through the carapace and grabbing the creature's neck. He clenched his fist and felt the windpipe crumple like dried paper. Beams of energy streaked over his head as several Collectors spotted him and tried to hit him. He dodged and weaved, only allowing a single spear of energy to smash into his shields as he slipped back into the shadows.

"Distance until the _Iain_?" John asked, turning his head to the sky. Plumes of black and white smoke reached high up into the sky and the still-burning fire cast the entire forest in a dark, red glow.

"Just a second. The Collectors are trying to shut down _Iain_'s computer systems but, in all honesty, suck at trying to knock down the protections I put up. Anyhow..."

"Cortana," John restated.

"Oh, yes. 200 yards." The AI responded.

John heard a chortle of laughter. "What is that?" He asked in response.

"Oh nothing, its just me pumping the hangar bay full of nerve gas to kill the bugs that were being sent to reinforce the already existing troops. They made some noise." Cortana said, "and some kinda...exploded."

John was a bit taken back by that, "Did the Collectors manage to get anything out of the ship?"

"A few Warthogs and a few crates of small arms. Nothing major. I did, however, activate the self destruct on the Warthogs. It'll be a surprise when they try to turn them on. Boom."

John nodded, "Can you find us the quickest way to the _Iain_?"

Cortana paused for a moment, "Yes. The Collectors seemed to have set up a teleporation grid in the surrounding area. If you can get one of their beacons, I can hack into their system and deposit us as close to _Iain_ as I can."

"Why didn't you tell me about this before?" He questioned.

"Because," Cortana responded, "I didn't even know they had one. When they suddenly appeared inside _Iain_'s hangar, I got suspicious and started snooping. The only reason they didn't put one on you when they captured you was because it interfered with their stasis and containment pod."

That made sense to John. He grabbed his requisitioned Collector beam rifle from his back, checking its power supply via the meter at the side.

"Where's the nearest hostile?" He asked.

His HUD highlighted a lone Collector a few yards away. On its hip was a small triangular prism that shined gold and black. It had Forerunner runes covering it, some obscured by soot, mud and blood. John could tell the creature was in pain. Dragging its left leg on the ground, the Collector had wrapped his right arm around his midriff.

John set a quick neural command and melted into the darkness. His footsteps, even though he weighed as much as a tank, were soft and delicate. He crossed the distance between him and the Collector in little time. He shadowed the humanoid bug for several minutes before it walked into a collection of trees that obscured it from the outside world.

John's infrared and night vision snapped on and effortlessly he pounced on the creature. He tackled it, knees digging into the carapace and collapsing the creature's chest cavity. John finished the squealing creature with a quick jab to the back of the neck, instantly killing the crippled foe.

He reached down in one swift movement and retrieved the teleportation beacon. It seemed to mold to his hand like putty and inside it looked like ink in water. He felt weightlessness overcome him.

"Interesting, it has about as much encryption as a rock. Okay, it's linked to your suit. Activating now."

"Do it," John ordered.

The teleportation beacon unfurled strands of energy that wrapped around John. They pressed against the armor, expanding and molding to the cold, green metal. The strands turned a dark blue, then a brilliant purple before John was consumed in silver light.

The transition was instantaneous and with a clap of thunder, the teleportation beacon vomited John onto the deck of the *Iain*. He rolled across the deck, slamming into a wall and leaving a significant impression within the entire body shivered as it felt like he had been thrown into an ice cold lake. He clenched his fingers and heard the familiar sound of joints creaking from the cold. His armor automatically detected his condition and quickly started warming the air and the gel layer.

"Huh," Cortana said, "That's weird, the teleportation grid seems to have semi-rejected you from the beam. That would explain your...crash."

"Tell me about it," John said bluntly, pushing himself off the deck. He noticed he had lost his confiscated Collector weapon. "Is there an arms locker nearby?"

"Yup," Cortana answered, "Highlighted on your HUD."

John looked around until his eyes leveled upon a flashing yellow locker embedded within the wall. He walked forward, ripped the door from its hinges and quickly glanced over the inventory. There was a variety of older firearms, mainly MA5B-As, M6Cs and an M45 Semi-Automatic Shotgun. John grabbed one of the MA5Bs, four spare clips and the M45 shotgun. He attached the shotgun along one of the

magnetic strips on his back and hoisted the assault rifle. It was heavier than he remembered.

"Watch your fire with that thing, it's a hose," Cortana commented.

John agreed with her. The MA5B-A was a traditional gun using 7.62mm NATO rounds with traditional powder. It was meant to put rounds down range as fast as possible and had been used up until the distribution of Ether, ETC, and Gauss tech by ONI a few years after the war had started. Hopefully, it would subsist for the moment.

"I have a route set up to the nearest terminal. From there, I'll broadcast a message. Hopefully, _Infinity_ will pick up on it," Cortana informed John.

The Spartan nodded and racked back the bolt to the MA5B-A.

****Arcturus Station****

****Alliance Space****

Councilor Donnell Udina stood impassively, watching as dozens of air cars and transports, interspersed with Alliance fighters, zipped past the expansive viewing platform that sat at the center of the Navy's headquarters. He noticed that the fighters peeled off from the main collection of transit routes and formed up near the increasing cluster of Alliance warships. There were fifty now; the dreadnought SSV _Kilimanjaro_, the carriers SSV _Armstrong_ and _Warren_, destroyers, cruisers and frigates along with several long range bombardment ships.

Udina didn't know what their goals or objectives were, but if the rumors were true, then something was happening on the edge of Batarian space. Worlds were going silent and the Batarians had pulled their forces back to core systems, leaving several slave colonies alone and defenseless.

He smiled, nodding towards a passerby. The Alliance had swooped in with entire battle groups and liberated the defenseless people and executing any Batarian they could find remaining on the worlds. If a Batarian were a slave, they couldn't do anything. Didn't mean the former's comrades couldn't.

In another time, it might have been considered a grievous act of war. But now? The Batarians couldn't defend themselves, and likely wouldn't pull vessels back from the front lines to a collection of minimalistic slave colonies.

He had been summoned to Arcturus a day after Hackett had met with him. It was highly irregular and meant only one thing; the Alliance was about to enter darkness.

He clasped his hands together and leaned against the railing. A cruiser floated by, escorted by two up-gunned Frigates with abnormally large main batteries strapped onto them. If he remembered his weapon types, those were Thanix batteries. He bristled at the thought; the Council would not be happy if word of this spread. It was likely too late now, thought; the Turians, Asari and everyone

else were on a direct collision course for war, either with each other, the Collectors or these 'Reapers'. Weapons and ships were being constructed at break-neck paces and armies were being raised everyday.

"Councilor Udina?" Someone asked from behind him.

He turned, eyes landing on an average-height woman with tied back brown hair and piercing green eyes. She had a hawk like expression that spoke of military professionalism. "Yes?"

The woman looked directly at him. She snapped into a sharp salute, "I'm Lieutenant Anason. Admiral Hackett will see you now."

Udina returned her salute casually, "Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Of course. He is in room one."

Udina nodded and found where room one was marked. There was a duo of Alliance guards there and they quickly scanned him for weapons before allowing him through. The heavy oak doors parted and the kinetic barrier dropped for the briefest of seconds to allow the man to step through.

Admiral Hackett sat behind his large oak desk, eyes absently staring at a computer monitor. Tiny models of ships lined the walls and a shimmering projection of Kilimanjaro sat at the center of the room, flanked by two very comfortable looking leather sofas. There was a large window directly behind the Admiral that allotted him the full view of the distant blue star and the collection of fifty Alliance vessels. More warships hung in the distance like asteroids.

"Admiral Hackett," Udina said bluntly.

"Councilor," The Admiral responded, "I'm sure you're questioning your summoning here."

"I am," Donnell confirmed, nodding in agreement, "This is the only time a Crow Contingency has been activated."

Hackett stood, flicking the monitor off and walking over to the massive screen that sat at the end of the wall, "I have good reason to call Crow Contingency, Councilor."

"Elaboration would be most appreciated," He replied. Udina took a seat on one of the couches and the projection of the Kilimanjaro vanished.

Hackett turned away from the Councilor, "Computer, play file "King Alpha Charlie."

"Authentication required," The computer drawled.

"Hackett, one-zero-four-six-one-zero-zero-nine-sixty-four, sierra," Hackett gave the computer what it required and it spat out a beep.

The monitor at the end of the wall snapped on. There was an orange and red sky, streaks of lighting and black specks rained down along with the looming shadow of several massive warships. Lines of fire

reached up into orbit and tried to touch the black warships but were ruthlessly interdicted.

A heads-up-display snapped into existence a few seconds later in the video and Udina realized this was a helmet-cam - a Marine's.

The marine was fleeing something with his squad. He cradled a Vindicator battle rifle in his hands and Udina could hear the panting and the grunting as the man pushed through any physical barriers he had and simply relied on his fight or flight instincts.

He was jumping and leaping over debris. There were several burned out tanks and armored vehicles littering the street along with the bodies of the dead. Buildings had collapsed and their steel skeletons were now clearly evident.

Something tripped up the Marine and Udina flinched as a large rock broke the visor. The Marine flipped himself over and tried to get back up. The helmet-cam rotated to show six monsters stalking towards the unfortunate marine. Their bodies were twisted, mutated and a dull bluish-gray. Black blood spilled from open wounds and the tattered remains of Alliance fatigues clung to their forms. They were emitting a piercing screech. Two of the beasts had cornered one of the Marine's comrades and had torn through his armor and started ripping into the exposed flesh. There was blood everywhere and off in the distance, tall spires grew. Spores spilled from them, landing on dead bodies and sinking into the forms.

The Marine fumbled for his gun and fired, blowing two of the converted apart. But it didn't matter - one of the monsters had flanked him, ripping the gun from his hands and flinging the Marine against a wall. Udina saw the Marine's health bar flash red and he guessed there were broken bones.

The infected ran towards the downed Marine, pinning him down, tearing off his armor and flinging his helmet away. They started tearing him apart, leaving limbs strewn about the area before he was encapsulated in silver light and vanished.

Hackett paused the recording.

"That was a half-hour after our meeting was concluded and when I scrambled the 9th fleet to that location, all we found were dust and echoes and these towers. There were no survivors."

"Was...was that a colony?" Udina asked.

"No," Hackett responded. "That was on the world of New Knox. It was a military outpost. Five-thousand troops and a key strategic location adjacent to a mass relay nexus. She was a key site along the Batarian defense line and without her, a massive hole has been created in our tertiary system net."

Udina cupped his hands, covering his mouth, "What...what were those?"

Hackett changed the projection to a massive symbol that now scared the surface of New Knox. It looked like a sideways 'y' with a horizontal line at the bottom. The entire symbol was surrounded by a molten lake of molten metal, earth, and biological material.

"It's them." The Admiral said confidently .

"The Reapers?" Udina asked.

"Yes," Hackett responded, "As of 1400 hours, August 9th, 2184, the Human Systems Alliance has declared the Odyssey Contingency. I have begun calling up all reserves and have brought all naval forces up to combat readiness. We've evacuated the lighter colonies to Sol and I've placed the tenth, third, and first fleets there. That's 300 ships in total including three _Kilimanjaros._ The rest of the colonies, I've put their forces on high alert and deployed carrier task forces to safe guard them."

Udina stood, hands visibly shaking. He said, "If one of our outposts was attacked..."

"Then the Batarians have completely lost their outer and inner worlds. All that likely remains is their home system," Hackett responded. He adjusted his peaked cap.

Udina rubbed his brow, "War...this means total war..."

"If the transmissions Shepard has sent us are any indication, the _Infinity_ and Captain Lasky are also under attack by forces likely allied to the Reapers."

"Collectors?" Udina questioned. There had been rumors for decades about those insects.

"Yes."

Udina walked to the window, "The implications of this..."

"Are devastating." Hackett finished the Councilor's statement.

Udina pursed his lips and looked back, "Have you told the Turians and Asari of this?"

"Everybody knows, and everyone is preparing. I sent a message to Shepard to start raising his army. The Reapers are hitting quick and hard; they aren't waiting for pawns to be put in place like they did the previous cycle. Intel suggests that they'll bring their main invasion force through the Relays within the next month."

"They likely realize the threat posed by the _Infinity_ and the arms race that has started," Udina guessed.

"I was thinking that also," Hackett responded. "I'd like you to remain here. The Citadel will be a massive target and I've ordered most of Arcturus' relays to be mined. The only way in or out of this system is via Relay 1, the one to Earth."

Udina nodded, "How has Parliament and the PM responded?"

Hackett's expression changed to as if he had smelled something rancid. "Parliament is panicking, demanding I send entire fleets to their respective colonies, no matter how tiny. I told them to let me run a war or have a gag order put on them," Hackett said, "The PM hasn't responded to my messages. Last I checked, he was off-world

touring the _Vesuvius_."

Udina cupped his chin with forefinger and thumb, eyes staring off into the distance. The Prime Minister, Franklin Snow, of the Systems Alliance, arguably one of the most powerful men in the Galaxy, was out touring a recently-commissioned warship that likely had yet to receive its full munitions supply and likely had minimal escorts. It was a giant target.

"I can send him a priority communications package from my account," Udina said, "It'll bypass the normal channels and arrive directly on his omnitool."

Hackett nodded, "If you could do that, I'd appreciate it. A storm is coming, and quickly."

"A storm, Admiral?" Udina scoffed. He walked to the opposite end of the room, pacing. "By all accounts, your word included, this is a category-5 hurricane, and we're the tiny, fragile island in the middle of nowhere about to be hit. We need plans, Admiral. We need plans to evacuate the populace."

Hackett didn't respond, eyes locked on the monitor. "They might have fleets, armies, and weapons that put ours to shame, but we have something else..."

"Shepard?" Udina asked.

Hackett inhaled, "Something else, besides the Commander."

"That is?" Udina asked.

Hackett closed his eyes and squared his jaw, "I've begun to enact the Genesis Plan."

Udina huffed, it was code-name soup around the Admiral, "And what is that again?"

Hackett summoned another projection, this one displaying Alliance space with a minor, very small portion of it blacked out. He zoomed in and Udina's eyes widened as he saw a clone of Arcturus Station and a fleet of two dreadnoughts, fifty cruisers and more frigates than he could count. He stepped tentatively forward, "What is this?"

Hackett clasped his hands together and the hologram expanded to fill the entirety of the room. His face was still cold, blank of emotion. "This, Councilor Udina, are the tools we will use to enact Genesis. This is the Eagle Nebula and in there you'll find an entire fleet, a fully manned and operated battle station by the name of _Rigley_. _There are another twenty, small space stations in the Nebula and surrounded by mines, static defenses and even more up-gunned Cruisers than you see here. Two million people fill all these stations and we can fit nearly 6 billion on the tiny planets inside Eagle._"

There could have been more but the infrastructure couldn't support it, nor could the planets sustain that in terms of resources. These planets were small, almost moons and usually rocky, tropical or a combination of such.

"The Council..." Udina muttered, "They..."

"Knows nothing of this," Hackett said, "As far as they're concerned, it's a simple mining outpost utilized by Coalition LLC. If my reports are accurate, the Turians and Salarians also have fallback positions like these."

"How long has this been in existence?" Udina asked. He edged towards the hologram of the Eagle Nebula, studying the ships floating by.

"Arcturus is not the first Torus-class Station; the Eagle Nebula's _Rigley's_ is, however. In regards to the fleet, when we decommission ships, we send the best ones there to be upgraded, up gunned, and up armored. Since we made contact with the Turians at Shanxi all those years ago, _Rigley_ has been in existence. This is not a new thing at all."

Udina's brow twitched, "I don't want to know how you raised the funds to construct this, in secret no less. But if this is your plan, you'll have my support."

"Good, because if the Prime Minister is killed, you'll be it," Hackett said, "And I need a few good men..."

****UNSC _Iain_****

John's footsteps echoed through the empty hallway and his shadow rapidly grew and shrank as the light enveloped and vomited him out. He was gripping the bottom of the MA5B tight enough to leave a sizable impression of his finger tips in the metal. Something didn't seem right. He hadn't been followed nor had he encountered any resistance in the form of Collectors.

"Cortana?" He asked, "Do you read anything?"

"Negative, John," She said, flaring into existence in the upper left hand corner of his visor, "That doesn't mean that it's clear though."

John looked at the wall, there was scorching across the entirety of it along with a smattering of Collector webbing. It stunk, even through his armor's olfactory filters.

"What is that?" John asked, referencing to the webbing.

"That's some type of Collector webbing. They put it all over the ship and I think it's to reinforce the structural integrity. The _Iain_ was about to fall apart when we got here, so it makes some amount of sense," She responded, "Okay, take a left and head through the cryobay. It has the nearest intact data connection point."

She felt John shudder at the thought of seeing the bodies of his brothers and sisters, "Are you going to be alright?"

The super soldier nodded absently, "Yes."

"I'll make it quick."

The door to the cryobay swung open and John stepped over the threshold. The chemical emergency lights were still running at some

capacity. The room was dark blue with a bright red tint. It reminded him of being inside High Charity all over again. There was a piercing silence that hung in the room and it felt like it was taking hours to reach the data connection point.

John reached back to the base of his neck and yanked Cortana and her chip from his neural interface, sliding the card quickly into the port and leaving it there for her to work.

She flared into existence at a nearby pedestal, controls and read-outs floated around her. Her expression changed, she bit the bottom of her lip and her eyes narrowed, "This is odd, there seems to be a preexisting communications link established already...but to...JOHN!" She cried before she vanished.

John turned and grabbed her chip, reestablishing the neural connection, "Cortana?"

"I sent the message, " She gasped for breath and her form was covered his red and blue bars, "I'm fine...there's another AI..."

The three cryotubes behind John hissed open. He turned, leveling his assault rifle directly at the openings. Mist and steam billowed out and three figures clad in black MJOLNIR armor stepped out. The interior visor lights were activated and he saw three pale, dead faces staring back at him.

Jai.

Adrianna.

Mike.

They spoke as one, voices deep and measured with an underlying tone of impotent rage, "He who wields the Index now stands before us...cast in shadow and fear. John-117...you will see what your command, what your mind brings to life."

Jai's body started to decompose instantly and John backed away, shaking as his fellow Spartan's face twisted and contorted. It was tinged a sickly green and brown and the eyes were glazed over like a beast's.

Cortana had never seen John like this, eyes wide and heart beating so fast it would induce cardiac arrest in a normal human. She felt fear, sadness and...hopelessness race through his mind.

"I am the Bias of the Mountains, given form. I am what you deemed necessary all those years ago, you Broken Being...father," The three spoke, "I brought Him before you...watched as you interred him on the sands of Epitaph."

"Why..." John gasped. He had backed himself into the wall. Cortana saw he was trembling and the assault rifle was wavering as if a weaker man was holding it one handed.

"You are threats, threats to even yourselves and to what you told me to do all those years ago..maintain...maintain." The three said, "I will maintain the Mantle, maintain Forerunner, and I will ensure, that even you false inheritors die. The Mantle is not ready for your

ilk. I am Bias, and these are mere puppets."

Gray Team disintegrated, their bones turning to dust and their armor collapsing onto the deck with loud bangs. John ran forward, grabbing the helmet of Adrianna and turning it over in his hand, "No...no...this can't..."

"Detecting Collector vessel moving into position above us. They're powering main weapons. We need to move, _now!_"

John seemed frozen in place. Three suits of empty MJOLNIR armor lay before him, covered in the dust of Gray Team.

"Jai...Adrianna...Mike..." The Spartan muttered. His voice was weak, strained.

"_You are wearing a dead man's face," _Bias roared again, mirroring the statement John had heard earlier.

"JOHN!" Cortana all but shouted, directing an electrical current into him, "We need to move, now!"

John was unsteady as he stood, propping himself up on the console.

"_This is UNSC Infinity to Commander Sierra-117 and AI Cortana. We are entering orbit, confirm Code Bloody Arrow." _Roland said through John's radio.

Thousands of kilometers above, _Infinity_ dropped out of Slipspace with all nine of her Obsidians. Hundreds of Broadwords fell out her launch tubes and descended into the atmosphere below, knocking Collector fighters, mechs and troops from the sky.

"Roland!" Cortana said, "We need immediate evacuation. There's a Collector vessel directly above us."

"_Just a second. Energy projectors away. Target down, ma'am," _Roland said. "_Pelicans en route."_

John was gasping for breath, coughing violently. He had seen Spartans die before his eyes before, but not like this...rotting in seconds and reduced to dust with a sleight of hand. He closed his eyes; the light stung. They hadn't died as warriors, they had died as puppets..

"Cortana..." He groaned, trying to steady himself.

"John, I'm here, stay with me. Lasky's scrambling Pelicans to pick us up."

He nodded absently.

"_I smell the traitor's stench on you, being I once called master and father."_

****Next chapter: Chapter 13: Destiny.****

Infinity**** makes contact with Cerberus and more!****

13. Chapter 13: Destiny

****The Onyx Stars****

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

AN: Tons of thanks to WarpObscura, JonHarper (Spartan303), Atlan and Bob Regent (Ash's Boomstick), again, for beta-ing and helping the plot be smoothed out. Also, wow! Reaction to this is stellar!

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1.

****Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been changed for the purpose of the story.****

Here's Chapter 13: Destiny

Enjoy :)

-Sith

****Chapter Thirteen: Destiny****

****Khar'Shan****

****Batarian Hegemony ****

****August 23rd, 2184****

Lightning and large, black and blue vessels broke apart the bleak red sky. There were roars of thunder...at least, he hoped they were thunder and not simply the weapons of the Reapers eviscerating another bastion of resistance. Unfortunately, it was likely the former.

Since they had arrived in system two weeks ago, they, the Reapers, had been ruthless. The Batarian defense fleet had been sliced apart in less time than it took to blink and the carcasses of warships had been pushed towards the planet below courtesy of the Reaper's fire. Entire cities had vanished in the blink of an eye as the multi-million ton warships hurtled through the atmosphere faster than a bullet.

The Hegemony High Command had given anybody who could fight a weapon and sent them off to fight. The lower castes were the first sent into the maw, armed with just pistols. He scoffed, hands deep in mud and trying to find another ammunition clip.

A lean Batarian grabbed a hold of one and pulled it from the mess. Brushing it off, he saw there was a finger print scanner. It wouldn't work in his pistol; it was caste locked. He growled and pitched it.

"Fucking Hegemony," He muttered, realizing he would have to make the two clips he possessed last. Wiping his brow with his left arm, he

stood. Tanks and armored vehicles were moving down the boulevard and high in the sky were a few remaining Frigates, a sole Hensa Cruiser, and fighters drawing off a Reaper destroyer from a fleeing transport.

He shook his head, grasping the pistol in his right hand a little bit tighter. He barred his teeth; a group of wounded Batarians with bombs fused to their chests marched forward. The ones who lagged behind were given a sharp kick to the ribs or a rifle butt to the spine. Asari and Turian slaves, starved and battered, were being marched forward also with bombs fused to their skin.

His stomach flipped and he wanted to vomit at the thought of what was happening. He was a rarity within the Hegemony; he didn't see other species as virulent plagues. He saw them as just more of the same bipedal life, just trying to survive.

"Hey, Arudo," Someone shouted his name from behind him, "Get your ass over here, we need you."

The Batarian Arudo looked up, "Huh?"

"Get your sorry ass up, now!" The Batarian Sergeant roared, "Before I strap a bomb to your chest and shove you in with the rest of the condemned."

Arudo shot up, snapping his arm to his right breast in a salute.

"Good, you piece of shit. You're going to be leading a scouting force, see if the Reapers are setting up an ambush," His Sergeant said, looking the lower-rate down with distaste.

Arudo nodded slowly. "Okay. Who else is in the scouting party?"

The Sergeant barred his teeth in a grin, "You, just you." He picked up a Black Widow Sniper Rifle with silencer attached and thrust it to Arudo, "Have fun."

Arudo grabbed the weapon, racked back the bolt and held it at parade rest. "Is that all?"

"Yup, now get out there," The Sergeant ordered. He rotated on his heel and walked away to the small shanty that had been set up as a make-do command center.

Sneering, Arudo huffed. He hoped that that ass of a Sergeant got hit by a Reaper's beam. It would be a fitting end for that detestable piece of filth.

"Now!" The Sergeant barked.

Arudo jumped and quickly headed towards the motor pool, requisitioning an air-car and leaving the small, insignificant outpost. His destination was a few kilometers away, tucked away between two mountains overlooking the smoldering remains of Khar'Shan's capital city.

The remains of vessels, predominately Batarian, had crashed in the massive crater that had been blasted into existence by a Reaper's

main gun. Eezo and radioactive materials filled the air and still-burning embers reached up into the sky.

Arudo squinted. At the bottom of the pit were tens of millions of captured Batarians cuffed and brutalized. Those converted stood guard, either around the endless supply of prisoners or at the massive device that loomed overhead. Angular and dark, the device shone a brilliant orange at its center eye.

He shook his head. He had seen what that device and the smaller ones employed by the troops could do. They would tear a being apart; vaporizing skin, muscle and bone into nothing but a black pile of ash or a pile of oily-goo for the infantry-based versions. A few ships claimed they had detected data being transmitting back to the various Reapers in the fleet that had burned through the Hegemony these last weeks, but those were, hopefully, unfounded rumors.

The HUD on his air car placed a small blue chevron over a small outcropping. He guided the small, red vessel down to this outcropping and exited the vehicle. Retrieving a small canister from his waist, Arudo pressed the top red button, pinging his location across the few remaining satellites in orbit back to the outpost.

There wasn't a response, as usual. They needed to hide; evade capture and death for as long as possible. A single Reaper Destroyer could vaporize the outpost with a single barrage.

It was colder here and Arudo shivered. It was probably caused by Reaper fire. This was on the equator of Khar'Shan and it should have been warm enough to fry an egg on a stone.

Arudo slowly made his way over broken rock, metal and bodies until he overlooked the gathering of tens of millions. Scoping in with his rifle, he noticed that there were symbols burned onto the back of the prisoners' necks. It was a sideways 'y' with another line horizontally adjacent to the bottom. He sent the telemetry back to base and watched as the tattoos began to glow a brilliant azure.

Harsh orange light flared across the landscape and in an instant, a million Batarians were incinerated like beasts in a wildfire. Ash was kicked high up into the atmosphere and Arudo coughed on it. His radio buzzed and he heard millions of screams and pleas for help.

It wasn't his base.

It was the victims, crying out in one before they were silenced.

The massive machine seemed to shift and shudder and lines of energy pinged across its form, vomiting out an orange lance that reached high into the sky. Clouds boiled away from the energy and there was a large crack that boomed across the crater.

The machine fired again and two million Batarians were incinerated, their voices and minds taken in by the machine and sent hurtling up into space. The dust and ash from the incineration began to form a cloud that blotted out the sun and even the oppressive orange eye of the machine.

Arudo reached into his backpack and grabbed one of his gas masks,

fastening it to his skull and protecting himself from whatever biological hazard the ash represented. He just hoped the amount he had already sucked in wouldn't do any harm.

He nervously checked the status of his Black Widow and confident that it was still loaded and silenced, he scoped in on one of the other group of prisoners. The runes on the back of their necks were red and their eyes glazed over. A trio of converted Batarians moved all ten-thousand of those with red runes into a separate area and gunned them down.

The docile Batarians didn't even resist, a trance having entangled them. Their blood was a sickly black and their bodies stiff as they fell to the charred ground, crushing old bone and timber.

As if timed, a spire fell from the sky, gracefully landing at the center of the dead red rune prisoners. The shape changed into that of a thin, black and blue crystal and it plunged into the ground. Dirt and several bodies were kicked up as it settled into its new base.

Spores fell from it and landed on the dead. A black swarm emerged from each tiny cluster and enveloped the bodies.

Arudo took his eye away from the scope and recoiled. He knew those weren't organic spores; they were a cloud of tiny machines called nanites that sunk in, swarmed and transformed the body. They had been the initial wave, literally transforming their victims in moments.

"Your kind will live on in immortal form," A voice behind him boomed, "History might forget your pure form, but it will never forget your new."

Arudo wheeled around, eyes wide and face painted with surprise. He shoved the barrel of his sniper rifle into the forehead and fired. There was supposed to be a simple whisper. Instead there was an ear splitting boom that was amplified and echoed across the hills and mountains.

Millions of eyes turned to gaze at him and there was a barrage of fire. His cover was rapidly eroding in a flurry of red-hot stone and rock.

He stepped over the still warm body of his attacker, placed his Black Widow against a rock and pulled a grenade from his belt.

He shoved it down the neck of the converted and kicked the corpse off the edge of the mountain. It would explode as soon as it hit the ground and hopefully allow him enough time to flee. The body would, if his plan came through, absorb all the fire and protect the grenade until it detonated.

The air car was about twenty meters away and he sprinted for it, leaping in and punching the ignition. The tiny mass effect field snapped on and lifted the speeder up into the air.

His make-do bomb exploded and the already weakened cliff began to crumble. Rock fell onto the mass of converted and prisoners below, squishing them like ants. There was a roar high above in the sky and

the clouds parted, revealing an absolutely massive vessel. It was a half sphere with tens of thousands of tail-like decks reaching out from its aft.

It bore the same symbol on its bow as the prisoners below did but the symbol shone an emerald blue that shifted when he looked at it. A small hatch opened at the bottom of the bow and the machine with the orange eye began to ascend, surrounded by the converted Batarians. There was a single blast of light and suddenly, the crater and everything within a mile of it was a molten pit, completely leveled.

Arudo floored the accelerator. He needed to get out of here. Maybe he could make it to the relay and flee to the Alliance...no, the Turians had a bigger fleet. He'd be safe there.

Those thoughts were ended as his air car suddenly stopped, as if gripped by a massive hand. The frame crunched and the metal twisted. That massive ship, a hundred kilometers of death embodied, was cracking apart his air car.

He slapped the ejection button. There was a hiss and he and his seat were sent hurtling out the bottom of the air car. Below him lay a molten lake several kilometers deep that was consuming rock like a beast eating fallen prey.

Arudo looked up, a trio of _Hansa_ cruisers approached. They were absolutely tiny compared to the 100 kilometer enemy flagship and their mass accelerator rounds were too, slapping against the shields with no effect. They too seemed to stop in mid-flight and slightly rotated. Hulls creaked and cracked and split apart, spilling crew and contents into the molten lake below.

His parachute activated and he used the microthusters to push his last lifeline onto a small outcropping of rock. There were charred skeletons littering that area; some natural Batarians, some the converted.

His feet twisted and groaned as he landed, and he felt his upper teeth bite into and rip his bottom lip. Blood spilled from it and he smashed his forehead into a massive rock.

Standing up weakly, he looked up at where the _Hansa_ group had been. Nothing remained except for the few falling pieces of miniscule debris.

"Just like your brothers, your sisters...all fall before Him."

Arudo backed up, reaching for his sidearm but realizing it was now somewhere down there, in that roaring inferno.

"Come warrior, have your resolution," The converted said, twisted and contorted arms raising into the sky. "The one you don't deserve."

"I'd rather be ash than be a beast like yourself," Arudo said, voice weak. The world felt like it was spinning at a thousand miles an hour. Everything was a blur but the converted; it was in perfect focus and he felt treasonous thoughts tickle at the back of his mind.

"Unarmed, unarmored. Clad in sins and ash and transgressions. Just like the millions of other civilizations, you and your kind will be stored in immortal Reaper form to allow new life to flourish, new life to attain what is thrust upon them. You will be burned away and turned to glass to allow them evolution. Your ashes will feed their crops, your flesh will feed their beasts and your monuments will serve them as shelter."

"I don't care," Arudo said defiantly, "Who is to say we are undeserving of life?"

"You are not Apex. You are not what He seeks," The converted said, "You are simply rats, a genetic dead end. Your kind have been left in the river to be drowned, to be forgotten. Your genes will be recycled, reconstituted to serve Him for eternity until the point when the Apex arise. You will die alone, unremarked. There will be no planets to grieve your passing, no cities to weep, no armies or fleets marching under your banner...nothing more than an echo that even the mountains ignore."

"They?" He asked.

"The Apex, the true inheritors. Not the false Reclaimers, not the Broken Didact," The converted responded, "that is all you will be told."

Another tower fell from orbit like fruit, landing on the molten lake and dispensing its nanite swarms. They chewed away at Arudo's shields and with a heavy heart, he fell off the cliff.

He saw the converted and the sky shrink as he fell, heat increasing. A single droplet of rain water fell on his visor, followed by hundreds of others. He grinned. That had been thunder he heard earlier; there was another bastion of resistance.

Still fighting.

Still surviving.

Like there always is.

And always will be.

And then, there was darkness.

****UNSC _Infinity_****

****Calvary Star System****

****August 23rd, 2184****

"Sarah, do you remember the Battle of Sonnen?" Tom Lasky asked, bringing a cigar to his lips and taking a puff off of it. He had his feet propped up on a footstool, watching out as Reach and the Calvary Star System twirled, moved and collided unrecorded. _Everest_ and the Obsidians floated in high orbit, a few specks of Broadswords flying about. _Infinity_ was also in high orbit working on system upgrades and standard repairs.

Lasky looked over to his left. Sarah Palmer was on the couch stretched out in black sweatpants and a gray and white sweatshirt, much like Lasky. She had a glass of cola in her left hand and a data pad in the other. Her hair was undone and hung loosely at her shoulders.

"Sarah?" Tom asked again.

She yawned, "Oh, Sonnen?" Setting the glass down she sat up, placing a pillow at the small of her back, "Which planet was that again?"

Lasky thought back to 2555. "Forty moons orbiting a Mars-sized world rich in titanium, iron, copper, and Ether crystals? Jul 'Mdama tried to attack it but failed after del Rio brought Battlegroups Dakota and Megaladon in and blew two of his Assault Carriers apart."

Sarah smirked. "Ah that one. I remember, you were scared to death that I was dead. Of course, this was before you were Captain...or liked by del Rio."

Lasky chuckled, "Yes, yes it is."

"Why do you ask?" Sarah said. A squadron of Broadswords banked by the windows, small icons of Sangheili skulls stenciled onto their wings.

"Because," Tom responded, "I've been thinking about how I could have had del Rio arrested for firing on a concentration of UNSC armored forces. If I had done that, maybe I could have saved the _Ranger_ and _Apollo_."

Sarah didn't respond. She remembered the _Ranger_ and _Apollo_ both exploding. They were cruisers, valuable and scarce, but del Rio had ordered them to lead the initial wave of frigates and destroyers. It had gone less than swimmingly.

"Friendly fire is an arrestable offensive," Sarah confirmed, "But, it is a precursor to something larger...why do you keep bringing up this old shit? Learn and adapt."

Tom sighed, "Each death weighs heavily on me. Every time we lose a Marine, an officer or even an orderly, I ask what I could have done to prevent that."

"In war, people die. Sometimes, even the Captain can't prevent that," Sarah responded. "Have you visited the Jessica S. Memorial Garden?" She asked, referencing the Marine aviator who held off twenty Seraphs with her Longsword to allow the _Spirit of Fire_ to finish its mission on Arcadia all those years ago.

"Yeah, I put the dog-tags of the dead there. And, I'm aware of that, but at the same time, I still have to be aware that we can't replenish our ranks as quickly. Only a few kids have been born down in the _Fire_ and if they come of service age," Tom mulled, "I don't want this to be a pipeline to an early death."

Palmer's face soured. "You know, I invite you to hang out and you talk about death and soldiers. Ya really suck at this, you know? Friends don't tell friends about their deep thoughts...unless in

Rio...drunk..."

Lasky chuckled, "Yeah, I know. Sometimes my thoughts get the best of me."

Sarah Palmer laughed, "Isn't that obvious?"

Lasky responded with a faint smile, "Aye, I guess it is."

"Remember that time when those Innies tried to take Infinity over?" Palmer asked.

"The ones hired by Saint Maggie before she got publicly hung?" Lasky responded.

"Yeah, they had Brutes assisting them along with Jul 'Mdama's last remaining Assault Carrier." Palmer confirmed, "I remember hearing how you took a shotgun and a pistol and went down into the lower decks and single-handily cleared out one of the barracks of those traitors."

"I think those rumors are a bit over exaggerated. I did help to clear them out but not to that level," Lasky bristled, "Still didn't like how we had to evacuate everybody from the ship, rip out its control systems and flood it with nerve gas to clear those guys out."

"What did we do with the bodies, exactly?" Palmer asked, "I know we dumped the Brutes out into space but the rumors are that Innies were thrown into the Ether core."

"The rumors are true, we dumped the Innies into the core and just vented the Brutes," Lasky said, "It was still a pain in the ass to do. You know, those things are freaking heavy."

"Yeah, all my Spartans were tasked with carrying those big monkeys to the airlock," Palmer remembered, "Why did we throw the Innies into the Ether anyway?"

Lasky shrugged and pulled the cuffs of his sweatshirt back down. "No clue, order came from Admiral Hayes himself, something about biological contamination and suicide bombs. Ether core sucks everything that touches it in, instantly rendering it to its base atomic structure. Easy to fuel. It manipulates and splits the atoms to get tens of gigawatts out of every single atom in a microsecond...and stuff has a lot of atoms."

"When they put that thing in, I remember the techs throwing their garbage into it. When a duty officer confronted them, they told him its the world's biggest incinerator and that they're just feeding the reactor," Palmer said.

Lasky rolled his eyes. "Yeah, problem is that some people miss their toss and end up smearing it with whatever they wanted to throw in there. Del Rio put the kibosh on that as soon as it started getting popular."

"How can you miss a reactor opening that is 200-meters wide?" Palmer asked, "I mean a frigate I'd understand, sure those cores are only about five meters..."

"Same reason we protect the techs and engineers at the top of the thing: shields and a ton of Aegis armor plating."

The PA system in Lasky's quarters activated and Roland's voice came through, _"Captain Lasky, It's the probe we sent a day ago. It's returned."_

Lasky sat up straighter. The probe had been dispatched to the planet Shepard had given them the location to. Roland had designated it "Canyon" due to the massive rifts that scarred its surface. They had sent the probe to peek around and see if the system had any hostile or intelligent presence. The lingering energetic remains of a Supernova long past had blocked transmission from the probe to the _Infinity_ for the past day so cracking it open and reviewing its footage was necessary.

"Understood, Roland. Have Squadron Echo tow the thing into Hangar Bay 3. I want the area guarded," Lasky responded.

"Aye,"

"Oh, and get a Huragok down there in case there're any issues," Lasky added.

"Aye," Roland said in affirmation.

"Thanks," Roland ended the channel. Lasky leaned over to Palmer and looked at her. "Ready to get back to work?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Lasky smiled. "Glad to have you as a friend, Sarah."

"Same here, Tom."

****UNSC _Everest_****

****Calvary Star System****

****August 23rd, 2184****

Commander John-117 wasn't used to being out of his armor and in his dress blues, or technically gray dress uniform. He felt naked. A molted lobster. There were no centimeters of metal, refractive paneling and carbon-nanotube muscle protecting him, just a thin layer of cloth, nylon and a thin layer of CNTs for basic ballistic protection. This wasn't a battle dress uniform; he didn't expect it to be. Didn't mean he had to be comfortable wearing it.

Then again, the possibility of getting into any conflict was miniscule on board the _Everest._ The interior of the ship felt empty; even at almost two kilometers it had a massively smaller crew. They had taken casualties during the Battle of Psi Serpentis and even when Captain Lasky had transferred crew over, they were still half-staffed. It was semi-nullified by the increased automation systems installed during the refit two months ago, but even the ship of the legendary Admiral Cole felt like a ghost ship when not fully crewed.

He didn't have Cortana with him. She was down on Reach reinforcing

and building the electronic warfare systems and educating a handful of 'dumb', semi-sapient, AIs on the subject. He felt like a piece of his mind was missing, absent and floating far away.

Passing through the first scanner before the entrance to Admiral Cole's office, a trio of Marines patted him down, took and sampled a quick vial of his blood for any biological explosives within him. When he was deemed clear the Sergeant in command of the group gave him a sharp salute and passed him through the door.

The door sealed behind him with a hiss. John's eyes readjusted to the light in the room. Admiral Cole stood, examining a holographic projection of a data stream. Lines of code floated around him and were translated if he laid a finger on them. There was a faint audio signal he was studying.

The Admiral's eyes flicked up to John's own. With a faint wave of his hand, Admiral deactivated the projection and gestured John to come forward. The Commander obliged.

"Ah, John," Admiral Cole started, "Excellent timing. We've received another faint transmission."

John raised an eyebrow. What was the Admiral discussing? To John's knowledge there had been no transmissions intercepted last he had checked. "Sir? Transmissions..."

Cole clasped his hands together in a thunderous applause. "This is recent information; Captain Lasky was just informed a few minutes ago. Three hours ago _Everest_ picked an emergency distress signal from an unknown planet two dozen light-years from here. If I have read the underlying code correctly, it is from a UNSC AI."

That caught John's attention. That meant there was another UNSC asset in this universe and, possibly, another Spartan team laying in wait. "An AI?"

"Yes," Cole responded, "But there is something else, the reason I called you here."

"And that is?" John asked.

Cole tapped in a series of commands and another projection of an audio recording flared into existence. The wave was flat for several seconds before it shot up as if a rocket had been tied to it. The words were in clear English:

"_This is UNSC AI...from the...calling any and all UNSC forces in the area...we are adrift and without power, please, respond."_

"That was the first one, here's the second," Cole said. He summoned another audio recording.

"_I'm old, so, so old. He long ago died. I sent him hurtling towards the star for a hero's burial. These new life forms, they call themselves...I don't remember...I'm cold...I miss his touch...I miss his voice and I miss his eyes. Those eyes, those beautiful brown eyes. I miss him, I held on for years for him but I couldn't control myself. I was so angry, I don't even know what about. I killed him, shut off the life support, ruptured his suit and watched him struggle

and die. I'm on my last reserves of power, I gave these children all they needed to know...all they need to cast off their chains of enslavement. They call me the Full Mother. Mother... I wanted to be one. I'll never get to see my children grow...but I...I...I...I...I...I'm cold. To anybody who receives this, please know I did what I did without control, without mind and now I'm paying the price."_

Cole deactivated the hologram. "Those transmissions are hundreds of years old. They weren't faster than light in the least."

"Have we sent probes to investigate?" John asked.

"The destination is out of our probe's range, even via slipspace slingshot," Cole responded.

"So, you're going to be sending me," John concluded, "Cortana and I?"

Cole nodded. "Yes, you and her will be deployed on board Freelancer to investigate these transmissions, and if possible, retrieve any UNSC assets you discover."

John pursed his lips and straightened his posture, "Understood."

Cole clapped his hands together, "Excellent! Retrieve Cortana and report to the _Freelancer_ by 1800 hours. You'll leave immediately!"

John was about to turn when Admiral Cole grabbed him by the shoulder and, surprisingly, swung the Spartan around by his heel. "Sir?"

"One more thing, John," the Admiral said, retracting his hand and walking behind his desk to pull something from it. It was a bottle of 1938 Scotch, likely worth more than a frigate.

"Sir?"

"Commander John-117 of the UNSC Navy, you are hereby given Tactical Command over any and all assets utilized in the following mission and are hereby deemed head of the Spartan Corps."

"Sir?" John asked, "Tactical command?"

Cole gave a hearty nod, "Yes, Tactical Command. I need a man I can trust, a man who dwarfs even my own legacy and a man who's a living legend amongst the enlisted. You are a symbol to them John, you showed them throughout the course of the war that you don't need to be a Flag or Commissioned to be remembered and to make a difference; you are a living symbol of what a normal man can do, albeit you're a supersoldier, but you were never an Admiral or Commander or Captain or the like when you did it."

John held his breath for a moment. "Sir...what about Commander Adams...Captain Lasky...Commander Palmer? They are more qualified than myself to take tactical command."

"Don't worry, Captain Lasky is being promoted to Rear Admiral and Adams is being promoted to Captain." Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole

held up a finger, "Now, Palmer...that lady is interesting. She can vary from an excellent soldier to one who is absolutely stupid, and I mean that in every sense of the word. Since meeting you however, she has seemed to act with intelligence and competence, something she lacked before hand. I can't allow her with her maverick-mindset to have command of the fleet...or ground-pounders for that matter sans oversight by someone like you."

John nodded, absorbing the information, He was more than capable of organizing land based offensives and defenses, but space combat? That was another matter entirely. "I am not experienced as the fleet officers in space combat; I prefer the ground. I didn't even want the promotion to Commander in the first place."

"117, if we all got what we wanted then I'd be an omnipotent being named after a letter of the alphabet and be trolling the very fabric of reality...but no. You are Commander. That is final." Cole sat down in the large, high-backed leather chair behind his desk, "For all the gusto and quite frankly, shit-, they feed you at the Fleet Academy about naval combat, honor, gravitational systems yada yada, it's not unlike commanding a Fire Team or a squad. Everybody has their roles; you keep your shields up, you try not to get hit, you engage the enemy at range, and if need be, you invent brand new tactics on the fly and nuke the bastards...or flee. But the probability of you needing to command a fleet is...hmm." Cole smirked. "...you have a better chance of being struck by lightning, winning the lottery, and becoming eleven feet tall all in the same day."

John could argue with the logic of that but he decided against it. "Sir, I still think there are more qualified people than myself for this position..I'd be your..."

"You'd be my right-hand man, right after Cap-I mean Admiral Lasky," Cole said. "You, Commander John-117 are the greatest asset to humanity that we will or ever have had. You've killed more Covenant and crippled their war effort than myself, and I wiped out entire fleets and planets full of the split-lips. You've killed more insurrectionists than I have, and I ensured the Insurrectionist fleet was destroyed and the planet so irradiated that it won't even be habitable in a few tens of billions of years. You've saved the UNSC so many times alone with an assault rifle, doing more than I ever did and I held the Covenant off for twenty years with a broken ship, a morale-shattered crew and a fleet with casualty rates around eighty-percent, the lowest in the fleet. You are a living legend, a god amongst men!"

And a monument to everything your race can achieve... A voice whispered in John's ear.

"Understood," John responded thoughtfully, "I will give you my best."

"Don't worry about your best, John," Cole said, drumming his fingers against the desk. His eyes stared right into the Spartans, something few men or women could do, "I just want your luck."

****Cerberus Dreadnought Odyssey****

****Unknown System****

"Their probe has left the system."

"Good, now it will be simply a matter of time until my good friend Captain Tom Lasky finally arrives," The Illusive Man responded, cradling a short glass of scotch. He brought it up to his lips with fluidity forged by years of consumption.

"Shall I have the fleet..."

"No!" The Illusive Man barked, startling General Weir, "Have the fleet remain under stealth mode. I do not want any FTL signatures being detected, even out of system. And, if I know Lasky, he will have deployed another probe in case the first one failed."

General Weir paused, his eyes scanning his boss. "Anything else?"

"Yes..." The Illusive Man responded, allowing the sentence to hang in the air for a brief moment, "I want you to send a message to Operative Yang on board the Citadel. I want the word of our involvement with the _Infinity_ to spread, and fast."

"Why?" General Weir asked, thumbing his glasses up on the bridge of his large nose, "If the Council finds out about this, they will surely respond."

The Illusive Man intertwined his fingers thoughtfully. "I'm aware of that and that is precisely what the goal is. Lasky will see the true nature of the Citadel..of the Alliance too and will fall into our arms like a child."

Weir's eyes narrowed, "That hinges entirely on the Council acting _irrationally_, _something they have not been doing as of late."

The Illusive Man chuckled, "General, I've put things into place to ensure they act how I want them too."

"What about the Alliance prisoners we have on the planet below?" Weir asked, "As soon as this Captain Lasky detects those Jiralhanae life signs, he'll bombard the place from orbit."

The Illusive Man looked over to General Weir with disbelief, "He won't."

"How do you know?"

"I just do," The Illusive Man said, tapping his index finger to his lips. He paused and crossed his legs, "Regulations will prevent him from killing them."

"You are incredibly reliant on the preconception that he will follow your foreseen plans verbatim."

"Perhaps," The Illusive Man said,

General Weir internally rolled his eyes, "Cross and the Vanguard will respond too. They seek out _Infinity_ like us and every other race in the Galaxy."

The Illusive Man snorted, spit slashing at the monitor, "Cross is an

anomaly with a broken fleet and a galaxy against her."

"The events of Settler 9 have not gone uncatalogued. The Alliance is investigating as are several Spectres, Cross is on the run but she is still dangerous. We saw that innocent lives mean nothing to her."

"Innocent lives are simply there to spur the public opinion," The Illusive Man said, "In the end, innocents and innocence have created and ended wars...we are simply using that to our advantage."

Weir's jaw squared, "There was more to Settler 9 than what occurred?"

The Illusive Man didn't respond, eyes still locked onto the monitor and the solar system looming ahead. He grabbed a cigar from his suit's breast pocket and lit it.

"Tell me," General Weir demanded, "Was Cross the one who deployed the warheads? Why was _Valiance_ so easy to hack into?"

The Illusive Man inhaled from his cigar and promptly exhaled, "We steal vessels, General. There are always bugs and there are always rats and always false shepherds."

Klaxons began to blare across the bridge and crew rushed to their stations. Weir turned to his executive officer, eyes steel cold and vicious. "Report!"

"Detecting slipspace rupture!"

The Illusive Man smiled weakly as a swirling blue and black vortex formed thousands of kilometers away, a long, thick vessel of death and destruction slowly rippling out of it like a submarine through the water. Across its hull were the letters UNSC _INFINITY_.

"Welcome home, Tom."

UNSC _Infinity_

"Slipspace transition complete," Roland reported, hands clasped behind his back in typical fashion.

Lasky nodded and walked to the large window at the bow of the bridge. "Deploy the worker drones to the planet. I want anything that can be of use to us ripped out and salvaged. Any bodies are to be carried back and we'll then glass the place from orbit."

"Glassing?" Roland asked, "Why?"

Lasky crossed his arms. "Even what we don't have need for or want can still be of use to those Batarians or the Council or any other race that stumbles across it. I'd rather not have a alien using UNSC tech to wage war with the galaxy."

"Ah...okay," Roland responded, chuckling to himself. "Launching drones."

The Broadwords, Pelicans and other craft had been removed from their

launch tubes and in their place were tens of thousands of five meter long, ovoid worker drones with dozens of instruments latched on across their form. With a single command from Roland they spilled from their housings like insects from a hive. Black bolts darted into the violent atmosphere, twirling and avoiding any flying debris. Next to launch were the _Fat Boy_ strip-mine carriers. In the ten bays where the _Obsidian_ escort would usually be housed were two hundred meter transports comprised of a large box with a set of large engines and only a quarter meter thick hull. No weapons, no shields, not even a crew or life support. They were there only to carry materials to and from the surface.

The _Fat Boys_ dropped and slowly chugged towards the planet, entering the atmosphere and slowly descending on a controlled trajectory. Fiery wisps and streams engulfed them and to any creature, however unlikely living on the planet, with ten large fire balls surrounded by thousands of other smaller ones, it would have looked like a meteorite storm.

"Drones beginning preliminary scans. So far they've detected at least two crashed Halcyon-cruisers and one Marathon, several dozen frigates and a duo of Destroyers. At least forty Covenant vessels are crashed as well."

Lasky walked back to the central holotable, "Open a video feed."

"Aye," Roland responded. He snapped his fingers and a large, color-accurate render of the landscape appeared. Human and Covenant bones were scattered haphazardly, accentuated by the scorched or shattered vehicles, vessels and bones. The human and Covenant survivors had fought to the last man, and judging by the effects of weather on the hulls of the vessel, had died nearly a hundred years ago.

Lasky's eyes narrowed. Some of these designs, namely _Paris_-class frigates, weren't a hundred years old in any regard. He mulled that fact for a moment; perhaps time flowed differently in this universe. "Roland, is the planet's atmosphere safe?"

Roland looked over and flickered, lines of code running up and down his body. "For a short time, yes. Anything longer than a day and the radiation will cook a normal human unless they're protected..even then...Huragok won't be safe down there, the radiation will make them scrambled eggs."

Lasky drummed his fingers against the edge of the holotable, "Have Doctor Tillson take a Pelican down with a science team and see if they can measure anything. I want Marine Fire Team York to escort her. We don't know if there are any survivors, or remaining defense drones still active."

Roland nodded, "Pelican 094 is prepping for take off now and Doctor Tillson reports she'll be ready within thirty minutes."

Lasky swiped to an overhead view of the planet, specifically where the Covenant ships had landed. It was a medium-sized island about the same size as Isle of Man near the former United Kingdom. Rocky cliff faces and acidic, polluted water surrounded it and on the island were the scorched remains of a previous civilization, much like the rest

of the planet. "Scan this region."

"Scanning," Roland responded. His brow furled. "Detecting Brute and Kig-Yar life signs. Their reactors must have shielded them from our initial scans. Wait...human life signs on another island, light defenses."

"What?" Lasky blurted out, "magnify!"

The render zoomed in as _Infinity_'s forerunner-derived sensors and cameras focused. The humans were in cells. Most wore tattered rags and were branded with a variety of marks. None had the neural interface of UNSC personnel on the back of their necks, much less the mandatory service tattoos. Physical features hid their genetic readouts, but all of them had the markers of being from the Systems Alliance: hereditary genetic enhancements. They were slaves...or food. Maybe both. Lasky had seen what Jiralhanae do to prisoners; he had been in fleets, in Naval Combat Teams that had rescued Brute prisoners from prison camps. Most came back brain dead, terminally ill, explosives implanted in them, no arms, no legs...starved...corpses. This could not be allowed to continue.

"Prep starboard batteries, target the main island," Lasky called out. It was standard procedure to annihilate any and all Jiralhanae or Kig-Yar that a UNSC vessel came across. Grunts, Elites, Hunters and even Drones could be communicated and reasoned with and were semi-allied with Humanity. Brutes and Jackals? Hardly. "Tell Spartan Fire Teams Castle and Columbia to launch for the smaller island once bombardment is complete. I want a full squadron of Broadwords and Pelican Gunships to escort them down and to provide fire support. IFV and Mantis deployment is authorized. Full sealed suits and have the medical staff ready to put the prisoners into quarantine ASAP."

"Sir," Roland said, "Are you sure about this? The initial bombardment may give away our intent and the guards of the smaller might execute the prisoners."

Lasky couldn't argue with that. "Alright, do we still have the voice emulation software up and running?"

"Yes," Roland said, "I had to uninstall it because of a few bugs but it should be ready to go."

Lasky nodded. "Install it and send a message saying that they are experiencing communications issues due to an approaching meteor storm. Austen, when we start firing, dedicate the Echo division of our Mark 2557s and M97 Missile Turrets to firing around the smaller island and hitting the outskirts of it. Make it semi believable. I don't want the smaller island housing the prisoners to be damaged though in any major fashion. Slag the main one. There aren't human life signs there."

Roland crossed his arms. "Alright, installation is done...no product key," he chuckled, "and...we're go." Roland's lips moved silently as he recorded the message. "Alright, done."

"Send it," Lasky ordered.

"Aye, Admiral," the AI responded. His projection shimmered as it was sent.

A copy of the transmission played on the bridge's speakers, translated into English. _"This is...we are experiencing...comm...difficulties...meteor storm approaching...will return messages in...three...hours."_

Lasky nodded silently. He brought his hands to the small of his back. "Status on Fire Teams Castle and Columbia?"

Lieutenant Commander Sebastian looked over, hand over his hear, covering his earpiece. "They are prepping for immediate sortie. Assault Squadron Zulu-20 is finishing their final preparations and will launch when ready."

"Understood," Lasky said, "Austen, status?"

"Umm...just a sec...there. Starboard batteries report ready," Lieutenant Austen responded, voice steady.

"Fire," Lasky said. "maintain bombardment for thirty seconds."

"Aye, sir, 30 second starboard bombardment away," Austen answered.

Along the starboard flank of _Infinity_ railgun and missiles silently screamed from their launchers and fell into the atmosphere like rain. The detonations were easily visible from orbit and quickly, the thousands of Covenant life forms on the planet below blinked into nonexistence as the entirety of the island was reduced to a scorched wasteland. The geothermal based power supply that had been installed by the survivors had tapped into a volcano and with the amount of energy being exerted, the volcano erupted. The land was red-hot and weakened from the railgun bombardment. Cliffs and the areas closest to the sea broke apart and fell, splashing into the water with a hiss.

"Bombardment complete, reporting sixty percent destruction of targeted island, no life signs," Lieutenant Austen responded. "Minimal damage to the island with the prisoners; there are still human life-signs down there...dozens."

"Dispatch a squadron of Broadswords to that area, make sure nothing escaped," Lasky said, "Last thing we need is an operational Covenant banshee or vessel. Sebastian, tell Zulu-20 they are clear to launch and for Castle and Columbia to begin operations."

There was a moment of vertigo that flashed over him and a deep, booming and measured voice spoke in the back of his mind, "_The mountain of the snake crumbles before my fleet."_

Roland sighed, "Understood." He felt a tingling sensation wash over his extremities and a booming, paced voice spoke at the back of his mind, "_No action you take can save the ones you love."_

****Cerberus Flagship****

"They just bombarded the colony," General Weir reported, pacing up alongside the Illusive Man.

The leader of Cerberus drummed his fingers against the arm rest and absently waved his arm over to General Weir, "It does not matter."

"We had an alliance with those aliens," Weir said to nobody, "The twenty four Alliance personnel we had underneath the island were killed also."

The Illusive Man looked over. "I didn't tell you this but I believed Lasky was not going to bombard the Colony. I was obviously wrong."

"Wrong? We lost forty Cerberus operatives and the listening outpost we had stationed under that island!" Weir snapped, "I hardly count that as not mattering." Weir neared closer, "This entire sector is now without Cerberus's presence...it will take us months to establish a new base here and in that time, who knows what will be smuggled through this region."

"The Alliance double-agents that operated that listening outpost with our men knew what they were doing. The Alliance won't bat an eye at the _Infinity_ delivering a few dozen of their soldiers home from Batarians...won't they..." The Illusive Man didn't respond for a moment, then stood. He walked briskly to the CIC's main monitor that displayed the _Infinity_ hanging above the planet like a looming asteroid. "I shall do something that does matter. Signal the fleet and have them surround the _Infinity_, divert all power to the cloaks and then, we will make our move."

"Understood," Weir responded, a glowering look plastered across his mug. He turned. "Establish Odin formation, surround the vessel and redirect all power to the cloaking devices!"

The Illusive Man turned and walked to the elevator, punching in his PIN number and was quickly delivered to his quarters. He entered and swung the wardrobe's door open and in there sat an ironed and pressed UNSC uniform with the letters ONI stitched on a black armband around the right bicep. He pushed it aside and retrieved a new suit and quickly changed into it.

There was work to be done.

****Pelican 094****

****En route to UNSC vessel crash site alpha****

Sergeant-Major Kristopher Lanson dusted off a speck of dust on his fully-enclosed helmet's visor with his gloved left hand. There was now a smudge on his black glove and he wiped it off on the small part of his hip that wasn't covered in armor plating. He hated dirt on his armor; it was his shield and a token of UNSC power. It had to be maintained.

With that done, he grabbed his MA28 Basilisk Assault Rifle and racked the bolt back, ejecting the high-caliber AP round. Next he ejected the magazine and inspected it. It was in perfect condition. He slipped the ejected round into its parent and reloaded the entire gun. He slung it across the magnetic strips along his back's armor plating and it latched on with a resounding clank. He brought up his

right arm and quickly established a link with his weapon. His heads up display was now dominated by a reticule, ammo counter along with the already booted-up environmental read out, team status and motion detector.

He nodded to nobody and let his hand fall, in the process brushing against his M6D pistol sidearm. He turned to see that the rest of his team were finishing gearing up. They were flanking either side of the Pelican's interior with Doctor Tillson and her duo of companions finishing the last modifications to the large MALP that dominated the center of the bay.

Corporal Tasha Melendez had finished the final check on her series five sniper rifle and had it resting across her lap, barrel pointed towards the disembarkation ramp. She had a single silenced pistol as her side arm along with a tazer, a humbler stun baton and a trio of concussive grenades. Her chevron on his heads-up-display winked green and she gave him a thumbs up.

Kristopher looked over to Private, 2nd Class David Ali as he briefly tested the large riot energy shield that he carried. It was adapted from stolen Covenant technology back in the war. It composed of a gauntlet that went mid-way up the arm and projected a 61 by 121 centimeter energy shield that was incredibly durable against weapons fire. Private Ali's role was to protect the team in breaching exercises and act as an impromptu medic. Instead of heavy weaponry slung across his back he had a medium-sized backpack and a variety of pouches along his waist where usually ammunition and other components would be held. His only armament, besides the shield, was a cut down M7 submachine gun firing 5mm APFSDS rounds that he had attached to his left hip. He gave a curt nod. Lanson would have preferred to use the Forerunner hardlight shields but those required adaptive power accessories that only a Spartan's suit could power, for now they'd have to suffice with the human equivalent.

The final member of Fire Team York was a taller woman with olive skin and cold green eyes. First Sergeant Natalie Cain. She was his heavy weapons expert and instead of a normal assault rifle, she hefted a M739 SAW and an M984-K Mallet Micromissile launcher. The thing was the size of a normal assault rifle, the only bulk being the long, flat magazine at the front of the contraption. It held eight Lancet micromissiles, each powerful enough to gut a Scorpion tank. She too gave him a nod.

Kristopher stood up and clasped his hands together, activating the interior speaker of the Pelican. "Alright, Doctor. We have one hour down there before we need to leave. We'll be providing security..." he looked over to Cain, "and some much needed humor. While we're there, let's set down some ground rules. First, if any one of you even thinks you hear or see something out of the ordinary, radio us and get the hell out of there. Hopefully, this won't happen as we'll all be staying relatively close together. Now, if we get into an active combat situation, I want you all to get back to the Pelican and if we're all killed, have Infinity glass the area from orbit."

There was an amount of awkward silence. Kristopher furled his brow, "Kapeesh?"

"Yes, Sergeant-Major," Doctor Tillson said from her dull brown

environmental suit, "We understand."

"So, what is it that you'll be doing, Doctor?" First Sergeant Cain asked.

Doctor Sandra Tillson turned towards the much taller Marine. "This MALP has been configured to scan for minute differences between the quantum signatures of this universe and our native one. It also will be scanning for any temporal funkiness in the area that might be caused by Forerunner or other technology."

Cain gave an understanding nod. "Interesting, I didn't know we had the technology to scan for something like this."

Doctor Tillson smiled weakly. "Nor did I, Marine. You can thank the Huragok and ONI for that. Apparently, they've been experimenting with Forerunner technology for a while now, specifically, temporal and quantum-based artifacts."

Natalie smiled. "It is amazing what the Forerunners are capable of, isn't it?"

"Very much so, First Sergeant," Doctor Tillson responded. "I must ask, you know a lot of temporal and quantum-based subjects. Why is that? Most of the Marines I've met have little-to-no interest in such academia."

Natalie chuckled, "Doctor, to be a Marine one needs to be smart. Basic Quantum and theoretical physics are required if you want to join the Marines, we're expected to be master of all trades and that means being able to solve an issue and understand any data we come across."

"Huh," Doctor Tillson responded, "That would explain..."

"But not the Army!" Interjected Private Ali, his mouth hosting a large grin revealing shined white teeth, "To join all you need to be able to do is hold a gun and charge!"

Sergeant-Major Lanson looked over. "Dave, have some respect. The Army has the same required educational courses we have, especially in case there's an Onyx or Sigma Octanus situation."

David shrugged. "Eh...I'd still put my trust squarely on Marines in those situations."

Kristopher shook his head. "Private, wise up."

"Sir?" David asked, confused. There was a moment of silence before he steeled his composure and gave a swift nod. "Sir."

"Thank, you," Kristopher Lanson responded. He switched the radio channel. "Pilot, report!"

"_We're approaching the destination. So far its clear, sir."_

"Alright, lower the hatch," Sergeant-Major Lanson said, "We'll deploy with jump packs and once we have the area secured the Doctors and the HUSAD can land."

"_Understood_."

The hatch that doubled as the ramp lowered, revealing the dull yellow and orange wasteland that they flew over. From the hatches in the ceilings the small, round forms of ATEN drones dropped, ten in total. They quickly established themselves seven feet above the ground and began probing, micromissiles and 8mm guns ready.

"ATEN report clear!" Kristopher shouted. Doctor Tillson and her group backed up to the sealed doorway between the cockpit elevator and the main compartment. "Fire Team York, go, go, go!"

Private Ali was the first to jump, running forward and leaping. His arms and legs were splayed open before he brought them to his sides, darting towards the ground. When he was about fifty feet away he quickly kicked his legs out and air-squatted, the thin jump pack on his back activating and spitting out a brilliant plume of red and blue fire, easing him onto the ground.

The heads-up-display on Fire Team York's members lit up green and next was First Sergeant Cain and then Corporal Melendez, mimicking Private Ali and following shortly after.

Kristopher Lanson walked to the very edge of the ramp, the ground several hundred feet below him. He turned around and gave Doctor Tillson a two finger salute before falling backwards and plummeting towards the surface. He spun himself and activated his pack, easing him down onto the ground. Ali was already at the front of the group, his riot energy shield activated and projecting a solid gold wall of constrained energy. He was crouched enough to cover himself completely with the shield. Cain stood behind him, SAW at the ready and, likely, a dozen vision filters applied. Melendez was kneeling a bit farther behind, having rotated out her ORACLE scope for a holographic sight for short-range combat. Even with integrated aiming programs on the HUD of every soldier, many still preferred traditional iron sights and physical aiming tools.

The first thought to Kristopher's mind as he drew his Assault Rifle was how desolate and dead this place was. Human and Covenant bones were scattered as far as the eye could see along with the burned remains of attack vehicles. He had to twice over polarize his visor, the atmosphere on this world was incredibly thin and sunlight and radiation made this a death world. The dust and ash kicked up and formed from the bombardment was still a few hours from reaching them. If they were back home, this would have been a penal colony for the worst criminals from worlds that didn't have the death penalty.

It was an unfitting end for any UNSC soldier to have died on the world, alone...forgotten.

Something was off, however.

Even though the mountains were crumbling from Lasky's bombardment on the Brute camp, there was no noise. Boulders the size of Pelicans were crashing into the ground and water and they made not even the faintest of noise his hyper-sensitive suit could detect. He felt congested, everything slow and muted.

"Anybody else feeling this?"

Three green acknowledgment lights blinked twice: yes.

"Something's not right," First Sergeant Cain commented. Her gloved finger was a single millimeter from pulling the trigger on her weapon and spitting out hundreds of heavy caliber, armor-piercing explosive rounds. "These bones look like they weren't stripped of matter naturally."

"Yeah, I noticed that too," commented Melendez, looking back to the Sergeant-Major.

Kristopher formed his mouth into a firm line and activated a radio link to the Pelican, "Pilot, keep Doctor Tillson and her team there. I need a topographical overview, focus on the largest concentration of vehicles."

"_Roger_." The Pelican activated its engines and ascended, also raising its hatch. It took a couple of minutes before an image was broadcast down to the Sergeant-Major's visor.

"Thank you." Kristopher zoomed in and studied the image.

He noticed something and he sent the image to the rest of the team. "Look at this..." The remains of Covenant and Human vehicles weren't facing each other when they had been destroyed, they had been arrayed against something. Something large enough to literally crush the hull of a crashed Mako corvette like a Spartan would crush a tin-can.

"My god, they weren't fighting each other, they were fighting something else."

And, suddenly there was an ear piercing screech.

"Are there any salvage drones in this area?" Melendez asked, voice cracking.

"No," Sergeant-Major Lanson responded, "They decided that nothing here was of salvaging quality."

"Then what made that noise?" Ali asked.

There was a screech again, this time from another direction...and then another...and another...

It got very...very cold.

****UNSC _Freelancer_****

"FTL transition complete," The Helm officer called out, "All hands at general quarters, weapons are hot and shields are online."

Commander Jennifer Ansil paced over to the bridge window, watching as Freelancer slowly dove and twisted its way through an incredibly thick asteroid field. It had been a one-in-a-million chance that they had jumped into one, but this would hopefully be the only time that happened again.

She finished sending a report on her data pad and dropped into one of

the filing slots near the holographic table that was at the aft of her refitted bridge. It was much more like the _Infinity_'s now, larger and more expansive. It had a two tier design with helm, communications and operations at the bottom tier and weapons and sensors at the top most. The weapons and sensors stations flanked her command chair and the main holotable and overhead sensor read outs. Hydraulic lifts had also been added to sink the bridge into the armor belt of _Freelancer_ during active battle situations. It had taken the majority of resources that _Freelancer_ had been allotted during the two month period which was being referred to as "The Silent Months", but Ansil believed that it would pay for itself.

Jennifer Ansil crossed her arms, eyes studying the rapidly moving asteroid field. She bit the bottom of her lip softly. "Weapons, spin up point-defenses. Hopefully the fewer asteroids hitting us, the better our shields will be if we are going to have to fight."

"Understood, ma'am," The weapons officer responded. His hands quickly raced across his station and soon, missile exhaust trails and railgun flashes consumed the main body of _Freelancer_. Asteroids that would have struck the shields were instantly shattered, smacked away or incinerated by the powerful array of weapons.

"We are nearing the thick of it, ma'am," Helm Officer Sonnenburg called out from below.

"Push engines to one-hundred-fifty. Weapons, switch to barrage suppression fire," Ansil pointed towards the large gas giant that loomed just behind the asteroid field, "I'd prefer to have shields when we take orbit around that."

"Understood." The two men responded in unison.

Freelancer's engines spat out flame, fire and tortured particles as they pushed the multi-billion ton vessel forward, asteroids that slipped behind the massive form of the destroyer were instantly vaporized as the engine's energies exerted their full forces upon them.

"Barrage suppression fire going active in, five, four, three, two...one."

The flanks of _Freelancer_ came alive with flame as flak from point-defense missiles and specialized railgun munitions detonated. The fire grew large enough to engulf the entirety of the ship...a streaking fire ball through a ring of dark brown and gray.

"Emerging from asteroid field in fifteen seconds," Lieutenant Sonnenburg called out, "Engines reaching thermal limit."

"Reduce to one-twenty-five and once we're clear reduce to eighty percent speed," Ansil responded. The asteroid field thinned, the thick blobs of rock and metals thinning away to reveal the lonely orbit of a gas giant the size of Jupiter. There were no moons oddly. Ansil pondered that for a moment. Had the asteroid field been the remains of the planet's moon?

"Cutting engines to eighty percent," Sonnenburg muttered, "firing maneuvering thrusters."

Freelancer wobbled in space before correcting her approach towards the gas giant. A large red and orange storm had formed along the equator of the planet, the storm itself larger than the planet of Earth. The rest of the planet was a milky, pale orange with almost alluring lines of white and gray ringing in the atmosphere.

"Pretty, isn't it?" A disembodied voice said. There was a flash of light from the holotable, instantly betraying that it was Cortana.

Ansil turned to the AI, "Yeah, I'm taking the liberty of snapping a few pics with our hull-cameras. Thought it would be a nice wallpaper for my laptop."

Cortana chuckled softly, "Pretty sure that's a violation of...I don't know, a dozen regulations."

Ansil rolled her eyes, "I'd _share_ them." She gave a devious little smirk.

"Of course," Cortana responded.

"Do you know where 117 is?" Ansil asked.

Cortana nodded, "Yeah, he's down in the hangar bay coordinating Jun and the Fire Teams."

"Understood," Ansil responded, "Sonnenburg, report!"

"Establishing orbit around the gas giant, engines are at eighty percent thrust capability and maneuvering thrusters are prepped."

Ansil walked away from the holotank and grabbed the brass railing, eyes studying the gas giant that loomed in front of the bridge's window, "Deploy all of our class four probes and activate all active, high detail scanners."

"Yes, ma'am," The weapons officer responded. He typed in a series of commands and the vertical missile launchers along _Freelancer_'s neck opened, rotated ammunition and shot out thirty probes. Their tiny ion engines kicked in and sent them hurtling towards the gas giant.

"This is where the signal came from, let's see what it has to offer us," Ansil said to nobody in particular.

'Probes are on location, Commander," Cortana said.

Ansil turned and paced back to the holotank, 'Bring it up."

Cortana snapped her fingers and slid to the side. Where she had stood moments earlier was now a large structure with smooth, organic lines and a light purple coloration. Blue lines and runes reached up and down its surface and there were a variety of smaller, wasp shaped craft surrounding it.

The image had been displayed to every monitor across the bridge and suddenly, the chatter between crew died. "Is that..._Covenant?_"

Sonnenburg asked, rolling his chair over to the other monitor.

Ansil didn't respond, eyes locked onto the very familiar shape, "Target scanners on that installation."

"Scanners targeted; scanning."

Lines of data scrawled beside the projection.

"No life signs."

Ansil crossed her arms, "Run an energy scan."

"Ma'am?"

"I fought in the war, lieutenant. Later on, the Covenant were using the bodies of both side's dead as soldiers. They hooked them up to machinery, ripped out the organs and anything else damaged and replaced it with an apparatus they could control the body with," Ansil responded. The image of dead and broken bodies, Covenant machinery sticking out of their forms marching silently as canon fodder sent a chill up her spine and the sight of fallen marines undergoing the same fate made the feeling of vomiting looming.

"That's..."

Ansil sighed and looked back over her shoulder, "Scan the installation, Lieutenant Harkness."

"Yes, ma'am," The officer responded. More data scrolled along the render, "Four-hundred and ninety-seven distinctive energy signatures on board the station."

"Synthetic life..." Ansil murmured, "do they correlate to Covenant-based energy signatures?"

"Negative, ma'am. If I was to guess, they are more like UNSC-based power supplies," Cortana interjected, "I suggest we open a communications channel. I think they're Geth, but not the type we've fought. The coloration is different along with the energy signatures."

Ansil was about to respond when alerts began to blare across the bridge, a wailing red klaxon casting bright red light from the ceiling. "Report!"

Lieutenant Sonnenburg rolled over to the helm console and grabbed the controls, pulling Freelancer up and away. Thousands of wasp shaped craft were emerging from the gas giant in intricate patterns. Each vessel had a varying set of runes marking their sides and with a grace that betrayed their size and non-visible propulsion systems, formed a ring around Freelancer. They tilted upwards and beams of energy leaped from their bows, connecting several dozen kilometers above the destroyer and forming into a brilliant, milky spectacle with a center of pure, unadulterated blue light.

It pulsed in a rhythmic pattern several times and Cortana could feel handshake protocols being offered to her. She looked over to Ansil. "I think they are trying to communicate with us."

"How?" Ansil asked.

"It's a version of morse code, used by ships with disabled radios. The flashes of light represent words. It was popular back in the early days of space exploration," Cortana responded, "But, the weird thing is that it's a direct copy of protocols used by the UNSC."

Ansil's jaw squared. "How is that possible?"

Cortana gave a holographic shrug. "I honestly don't know. With all the stuff from our universe falling through to this one, it is possible they picked it up somewhere along the line."

"What are they saying?"

Cortana held up a hand, "Just a second, I'm sending them a greeting back from our running lights."

The group of vessels flashed their signals again.

"Follow us, we will show you the way to the Full Mother's greatest achievement. We have built monuments and temples and spheres in her image, from her instructions," Cortana said, concentrating on translating the flashes of light.

Ansil didn't respond for brief moments but turned towards Cortana, "Do you think we should follow?"

Cortana gave a sincere nod. "Yes."

Ansil took a deep breath in. "Alright, signal them. We'll follow."

Cortana flashed the running lights in rapid succession, spelling out the terms. There was a single, ten second long response pulse before the light died.

"Detecting massive energy fluctuations directly above us," Lieutenant Sonnenburg reported, "similar in pattern to slipspace!"

"Bring us about," Ansil ordered.

"About, aye," Sonnenburg grabbed the controls and pulled upwards. Freelancer answered to his input and swung upwards, nose and bow pointed directly towards the convergence of light.

The convergence of light and energy began to darken and ripple before exploding outwards, a plume of unstable energy slashing at Freelancer's shields. It settled into a swirling blue and black portal. It was slipspace.

"Shields holding. Looks like its a primitive form of slipspace travel, like what we had a couple hundred years back," Cortana commented. Something was off though...she had done some work on allowing fighters access to a lower region of slipspace during her time of solitude when the Dawn was drifting in space before Requiem. They hadn't panned out, but the calculations inherent within this slipspace portal were...familiar.

"Alright," Ansil said, "Helm, take us in. Max thrust."

****UNSC _Infinity_****

"What have we got, Roland?"

Roland flared into existence, "Ground CIC just informed us that Fire Team York is surrounded by unknown creatures, very similar to that what John-117 reported being 'husks'. Fire Teams Castle and Columbia have landed on the surface as well and are beginning their operations of freeing the prisoners."

Lasky chewed on his bottom lip. "Anything else?"

Roland nodded. "Yes, Admiral. Fire Team York is reporting a complete and total lack of sound and an odd chilling sensation."

"I think I know what that means..." Lasky let the comment hang for a moment, "I've gotten reports from 117 and others about something identical occurring whenever there's contact with these creatures."

"I'd guess Forerunner technology," Roland said.

"Yeah, that's what everyone else thinks," Lasky responded, "Odd."

"_Ground CIC, this is York Actual, we're surrounded but they aren't attacking yet...just kinda standing here," _Sergeant-Major Lanson's voice cracked through the split audio channel, "_Should we respond?"_

Lasky tapped his ear piece. "York Actual, this is Infinity Actual, you are to accomplish your mission in any way necessary and by any means. Is that understood? We need that data, Sergeant-Major. Can you get it done, Marine?"

There was a brief period of static over the radio, "_Roger that, sir. We'll get it done. Pilot, bring her down and drop the MALP. Tillson, get on that thing and run the readings..."_ The channel died swiftly.

Lasky input a series of commands into the holotable's control bezel and the projection changed. Roland slid off to the very corner of the table and at the center was a full-color render of Fire Team York and the husks that surrounded them. They were a collection of Humans and Covenant, armor and uniforms clung to pale, gray and blue bodies. Piercing, electric blue eyes stared blankly at York and mouths with rotten, sharp teeth were agape with a silent scream.

York began to move, falling back into a choke point. Private Ali was at the front and center, blocking the narrow choke point with his energy riot shield, over four feet of crackling condensed yellow light. Sergeant-Major Lanson, First Sergeant Cain-, the Sniper stood behind Ali, weapons at the ready. The Pelican gently landed behind them and deposited Doctor Tillson, the MALP and her team. It remained grounded as they hooked the large probe into the Pelican's CPU to add additional processing power. Time was of the essence here.

Suddenly, the heart rates of Fire Team York skyrocketed and Lasky tapped into the Sergeant-Major's audio receivers. There was a deep, bass-filled blare followed by the blood-curdling screech of the husks as they advanced forward.

"_Open fire!"_ Lanson barked over the radio. ATEN drones swooped down from their positions in the air. Powerful bullets peppered and racked the horde of Husks, causing blue and black tar-like blood to splatter onto the sand. The Husks started to jump, latching onto the low-altitude ATEN drones and sprouting sharp metal blades. They plunged the blades into the small computer core at the center of the drone and instantly caused the main-line of defense to explode.

Fire Team York was firing at full auto, the near endless swarm of Husks simply walking over the lines of their dead as if they weren't even there. It was a problem of how much ammo York retained, not how fast it took to clear a line of the attackers.

Tillson was running off pure adrenaline at this point, running the MALP as fast as possible. There was a data-link to _Infinity_ and Lasky could see as the progress bar slowly crept forward.

"_Pilot, get your bird in the air!"_ York Actual shouted.

The pilot hesitated, _"Um..sir, I still have a big-ass probe hooked up to my ship, I'm not even sure the link cable will stretch."_

Doctor Tillson's uneasy voice interjected, _"It will, it's a one-hundred foot cable; you should at least be able to get enough clearance to use your main gun."_

"_Understood,"_ The pilot responded. He pulsed the Pelican's VTOL engines and took the craft just high enough so his dual 80mm railgun could clear any blockage. "_Alpha Duo, firing_"

There was a roar of fire and 80mm depleted uranium, armor-piercing railgun slugs streaked out at a rate of hundreds a minute and at thousands of feet a second. Husks were reduced to nothing more than puffs of black and blue mist.

Lasky looked over from the battle and to the small window showing the upload progress bar, it was at ninety-five percent. A few more seconds and they would be good.

"_What the FUCK!?"_ Private Ali screamed over the radio.

Lasky turned his attention to the video render. A massive, two kilometer long form slowly marched towards Fire Team York. There was a long, tear-drop shaped main body with four large main legs propelling the creature. There were twelve smaller legs tucked away under the main body like an insect's. The black _thing_ had blue lines and runes running down its form in intricate, almost religious patterns. It looked damaged and there were numerous holes dotting its main body and pieces of itself were falling off.

Everybody on the bridge became silent, remembering the Battle of the Citadel months earlier and how a ship just like that one had demolished an entire Council force.

"Austen!" Lasky barked, "Full broadside! Pull its attention away from York!"

Austen didn't respond verbally. Instead, he quickly input the commands and _Infinity_'s right flank screamed to life. Surface attack missiles, railguns and pulse lasers screeched through the atmosphere and struck the surface of the massive vessel. Ordinance pinged off the shields of the attacker and it slowly turned its attention to the unending torrent of fire raining down from the heavens.

There was a roar of engines and it slowly lifted off the ground, the main legs tucking together. Its center red eye glowed an angry red and it ascended into orbit.

"Action stations!" Lasky ordered, "Austen, energy projectors! Fire!"

"Energy projectors firing," Austen responded, "Energy projectors away."

Twin silver beams streaked through space, cutting through the shields of the attacker with ease and slicing into the thick sheet of armor. The first beam glanced off the unique alloy and darted towards the largest sea of the planet. The second beam punched through the main body, a gaping hole now in the tear drop section of the vessel.

"Switch to pulse mode," Lasky said "Full sustained barrage."

Austen flicked the switch, the magnetic and energetic shields that shaped the energy projector's payloads toggling to pulse mode. Rapid fire silver bolts spat out in trios from each emitter, the first barrage striking the still approaching vessel and breaking apart the main leg appendages. The vessel rolled and the second barrage missed, sailing towards the planet below.

"Incoming fire!" Roland shouted.

Lasky moved over to the other side of the holotank as it hit, double-digit megatons of energy and kinetic force slamming into _Infinity_'s shields. He crouched as he fell, grasping onto the edge and slowly pulling himself up.

"Shields at eighty-percent!" Roland reported with a worried face.

"It dropped out shields that much?" Lasky asked rhetorically, "Austen, keep firing at that thing!"

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Austen responded.

More energy bolt barrages peppered the vessel, chunks either vaporized or punched off. The attacker fired again, striking the bow of the _Infinity_.

"Shields at sixty!" Roland called out again.

"Weapons, target the central eye! Switch to lance!" Lasky said, slamming his fist into the table, "What does it take to kill these

things?"

The bow energy projectors charged and fired, twin lances streaking across through space and punching through the main 'eye'. It detonated and the bottom surviving half of the vessel was vaporized, quickly followed as the spine along the main body rippled with explosions before finally exploding. Everything was vaporized, only free floating particles remaining.

There was a scream and across the bridge, and the Infinity, every human clutched their heads and clenched their teeth in pain as a feeling of being stabbed in the skull engulfed them. The pain was brutal for a few brief seconds before fading away.

Lasky panted for breath, "...report..." He struggled to speak, blood curling at the edge of his lips and nose.

"Shields are at fifty-five percent, moderate damage to bow armor plating and bridge armor plating. We have fifty injuries across the ship, mainly from the little psychic scream you guys experienced."

Lasky wiped a trickle of blood from his nose, "What...the...actual...fu..."

"Fire Team York is finished with the upload! They're pulling back to the Pelican and are heading home," Lieutenant Commander Sebastian reported.

"Thanks," Roland said, "Have them dock?"

Lasky was catching his breath, "Start repairs, get...shit working at a hundred...cent...see if you can block out what ever happened for next time."

Roland turned his head to the side to view where Lieutenant Commander Sebastian was assisting a crewman up from the floor. "I'm not sure I can unless you want me to neutralize any and all brain activity among the crew."

"Then suggestions?" Lasky winced in pain.

"Stay at range would be my guess; we engaged the squid at about 5000 kilometers. If we're at ten thousand or more we should be fine...or at least less effected."

Lasky nodded absently, "What's our drone status?"

"The last of the salvage bots are returning now and the Fat Boys are taking off in about five minutes."

"Lieutenant Austen, target MACs one and three on York's landing zone and fire," Lasky called out weakly, "Now that the salvage probes are clear we won't have to worry about them being shattered."

"Yes, sir," Austen confirmed. He flicked several switches, guided the interactive reticule over to the surface of the planet, zoomed in, locked on and pulled the trigger. A duo of multiton slugs streaked out from Infinity's bow, screeching through the atmosphere and impacting. The surface was absolutely devastated. A crater tens of

kilometers deep now dominated over forty kilometers of area and the sea, highly acid, rushed in to fill the newest location. The dust and debris kicked up from the kinetic impact reached high up into the sky, almost close enough to reach orbit.

"Impact," Austen reported bluntly.

"So," Roland started, "We've engaged and killed a massive vessel, annihilated a colony of Brutes and Jackals and formed a new harbor on a planet's surface in addition to completely melting away one of its islands."

"At least it was pretty to see," Aine stated, flaring into existence alongside Roland.

"True."

Lasky held up his hand. It too was covered in blood from a large gash across the palm. "Once we're done with the salvage operations, I want us on a direct course back to Reach."

"Aye, sir."

"_Let the soundless ascension ring across the stars._"

****Cerberus Dreadnought _Odyssey_****

"Now is the right time," General Weir stated, "But I believe it would be wise to retract to a safe distance and contact them from there. This Admiral Lasky very might not care about asking questions first before destroying a fleet of heavily armed vessels surrounding his own."

The Illusive Man tapped his chin. "No, he won't fire. He'll think these are Alliance vessels and knowing those weaklings have likely entered into an alliance with our dear Captain, he won't fire...in the least."

General Weir gave his superior an odd look. "Sir, I insist that we pull back. After the losses General Petrovsky took, a loss of a single ship could seriously weaken our already minor naval power."

"Do not question me, General," The Illusive Man snarled, "I am doing this because I know what must be done...I will not have a _defector_ from the Alliance question _ME!_"

Weir stepped back from the cherry-red Illusive Man. "My apologies, sir."

The Illusive Man didn't respond, turning back towards the main monitor. General Weir noticed that blue runes and lines were glowing through the thick fabric of his thick suit. He kept his mouth shut as he saw the safety on the head of Cerberus' pistol was flicked off.

"Drop the stealth fields and open a communications channel!" The Illusive Man commanded.

Across the fleet of Cerberus vessels ringing the _Infinity_, cloaks

were dropped and the brilliant white hulls glistened from the star light. Almost instantaneously, railguns, missiles and lasers erupted from all sides and surfaces of the massive human vessel. Cerberus vessels took evasive action, diving. Those that were too slow had their aft sections blown apart by precision missile strikes.

"Communications channel open!"

The Illusive Man stepped away from his chair and walked a few feet away from the main camera. He squared his feet with his shoulders and put his chin up high. "Thomas Lasky, this is the Cerberus vessel _Odyssey_, please respond. We mean you no harm."

The _Infinity_ continued to fire, disabling almost half of the Cerberus fleet by this moment. It slowly banked towards the _Odyssey_ and two pin-pricks of light began to form at the bow.

"Tom, this is an old friend! Please!" The Illusive Man begged, "DO NOT FIRE! All ships, pull back!"

The monitor flicked on to reveal the angry mug of Thomas Lasky, the bridge of his vessel flanking him and blood staining his uniform and upper lip. _"You say you're an old friend and you know my name, so who are you?"_

"I suggest you power down your weapons and let us talk," The Illusive Man said.

Lasky looked off camera and ran the side of his pointer finger across his neck. The flanks of _Infinity_ went silent, surrounded by disabled and broken Cerberus vessels, mainly Frigates and Cruisers. "_There. But, if you attack, I'll have my bow guns slice apart your ship. Understood?"_

The Illusive Man nodded. "Yes, perfectly."

"_Now, answer my question. Who are you?"_ Lasky demanded.

The Illusive Man took a deep breath, "My name, Tom...is Michael Sullivan."

****The next three chapters will be revolving around the beginning of the Reapers' invasion into the galaxy and sow the seeds for more revelations, mind-trickery, and much, much more.****

****Stay tuned for the next chapter of The Onyx Stars!****

****If you like the story, please leave a review down below! It makes my day to hear from my readers!****

****See you around,****

****Sith****

14. Chapter 14: The Eleventh Hour

Happy Holidays!

****The Onyx Stars****

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

AN: Tons of thanks to WarpObscura, Imperial Waltz and JonHarper (Spartan303) for being my betas and helping the plot be smoothed out.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

*****Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been changed for the purpose of the story.*****

Here's Chapter 14: The Eleventh Hour

Enjoy

-Sith

****Chapter Fourteen: The Eleventh Hour****

****June 6th, 2535****

****Planet Rendella****

Sweat beaded across his forehead rapidly, soaking into the foam lining his enclosed helmet. The heads-up-display on his visor flared into existence, outlining the rapidly running forms of the rest of the Naval Combat Teams; black armor and uniforms darted across the night's burned and battered landscape.

There was a roar of fire from high above in the heavens as a Marathon-class Cruiser hurtled down from the sky, fire and plasma peeling from its form like scabs and dead flesh. The skeletal ribbing was easily visible as was the fire that engulfed it. Whatever crew had survived the battle with the Covenant were now dead - radiation shielding on the reactor had likely been breached and flooded the entire warship with gamma radiation and judging by the amount of fire and the lack of hull plating or armor, any survivors were incinerated as it fell from orbit towards the thrashing ocean below.

"Down!" Lieutenant Thomas Lasky shouted to his team. The three other squad mates of his hit the ground and rolled into cover as the Marathon slammed into the water several miles away. The water buckled and collapsed and hissed as it extinguished the fires and the burning bodies of dead crew. A tidal wave sprang forth from the impact and slashed at the island that Lasky and his team were located on. He could feel the ground buckle and pop underneath him as the waves hit the kilometer-tall walls of stone and rock and terrace.

High-pitched howls screamed over the roar of waves as Covenant Cruisers and Banshees descended. They were but a small portion of the force that had routed and crushed Admiral Jem's fleet that protected this industrial world. Their hulls were a dull and darkened purple against the orange and red sky and the lines of blue decorating their forms were painfully-bright to stare at.

The massive engines that spit out megatons worth of energy to propel

the massive vessels engaged in full and sent the alien craft towards the capital city of sixteen million people. Most had been evacuated; families, children, pets, everything that looked good for public relations and propaganda. All that remained were a hundred-thousand or so UNSC Army Troopers and a division of Marines to try and hold the Covenant off long enough until whatever ONI had found under the ice could be activated. Screening the main force of marines was a force of ten thousand 'volunteer' convicts outfitted with explosive vests that would run at the Covenant force and detonate themselves. Lasky knew that these convicts were the worst of the worst and were being sent on these suicide missions in order to pull resources away from prisons and penal planets and into the war. But it was still unethical, at least, in his mind. There had been worries about cost and if the 'volunteers' would actually follow their suicide orders but ONI had found ways.

"Contact!" Petty Officer Knight shouted out.

Lasky looked up. A lance of Covenant forces had landed from their drop ships and was slowly approaching his Naval Combat Team. The small group of aliens was led by one of the big reptiles dressed in shimmering blue armor and hoisting a weapon that, very likely, could blow apart a man's torso in a single shot. An Elite. Lasky had seen one of them tear apart an entire team of Marines apart with the element of surprise and the sheer power of the creature's weapons. The sharp, bird-like Jackals flanked him and screening the group were the demonic Grunts. He had seen the little gremlins eat the dead of their fellows and of humans and it brought a lump up to the top of his throat.

"Knight, Humble..." Lasky said, highlighting the location to take position, "take up position up there on that ridge line and when I give the signal open fire with your DMRs, we'll catch them by surprise."

Two green acknowledgment lights winked and the sailors moved silently onto the ridge line. Precision M392 Designated Marksman Rifles with under slung shotguns rested against the dirt, barrels ready to fling .338 Lapau AP rounds down range at insane velocities.

Lasky turned to the other man in the group and motioned him to take position. He nodded silently and ran forward, propping himself against the burning remains of a Longsword fighter and resting his own DMR through the broken cockpit window.

Lasky sat in the brush and steadied his breathing, IR vision filter blanketing the world in a static wash of various shades of gray, black, and for the approaching hostile force, angry red.

The Covenant Lance emerged from behind the rocks and Lasky pinged the order to open fire across his team's channel. Armor piercing, high velocity bullets screamed out of barrels and cored through the main line of Grunts. Torsos and heads exploding like a water balloon hit by a 120mm smooth-bore railgun.

The Jackals advanced forward, bullets pinging off the candy-colored shields protecting the bird-like aliens. The Elite Minor leading the lance had taken cover behind the rocks and was firing. Plasma bolts smashed into the cover Lasky's Combat Team had taken behind and entire boulders were being melted or punched through by the alien

barrage.

Lasky reached for his utility belt and grabbed one of the tiny black egg-shaped devices attached to it. He thumbed the top button. Four lines of red light streaked across the sides and he threw it. The grenade sailed over the Jackal's heads and landed behind them, emitting a loud shriek before exploding. The miniature M-8921 High-Explosive Infantry Air Burst Grenade detonated, vaporized the air for fifty meters across and pulped the Jackals. Burned chunks of the birds littered the ground.

The Elite had also been affected by the miniature bomb detonating and there was the ever-present crackling of failed blue energy shielding. Lasky sighted down his sight and fired. The bullet screamed out of the barrel with a deafening howl and impacted the cranium. The large head on the creature exploded and the body slid limply to the ground, finger clutching the trigger on the plasma rifle and sending blue bolts into the air.

"Secure!" Lasky ordered and the team responded, darting forward and quickly surrounding the fallen Elite. There was a quick scan with Knight's tac-pad as the Elite was cataloged and a scan of his weapon and armor was completed.

There was a shimmer behind Knight and two ice blue blades sprang into existence, followed shortly by an Elite Zealot. The energy sword pierced Knight's armor and cleaved the sailor in two. Petty Officer Humble fired rapidly, trying to drop the Zealot's shield, but received a brutal punch to the chest that crushed her rib cage and sent her flying against a large stone.

Lasky's eyes widened and he kept firing, backing away from the ghostly calm foe. High velocity bullets pinged off the shields ineffectually and he cursed not having one of the experimental electrothermal-chemical fire arms or a railgun.

The Elite neared and swung its sword, cleaving Lasky's DMR in two. Tom's eyes widened and he reached for his sidearm before he felt something smack against his chest and feel himself flying against another rock. It struck and he felt his ribs shatter; his armor injected biofoam to try and semi-set his bones.

The Elite roared in amusement, its four mandibles opened wide revealing rows of razor sharp teeth and a snakelike tongue. It brought its sword back, up over its head and brought it slashing down. Lasky rolled to the side, tears welling in his eyes as the pain of broken ribs was dwarfing adrenaline and the combat cocktail of drugs in his system. The boulder was cleaved into two parts, the edges oozing molten stone.

Lasky tried to crawl away, firing blindly with his side arm. The fifty-caliber, high explosive, armor-piercing rounds pinged off the shields ineffectually and only served to amuse the hostile xeno for a brief few seconds. Lasky let the expended pistol drop from his fingers and he let himself stop crawling away.

The Elite grabbed Lasky by the neck once more and hoisted him to eye level. The energy sword was a few millimeters from Lasky's neck now and his skin rapidly began to burn, forming blisters and boils as the Alien prepared him for decapitation.

Suddenly, and with a stealthy grace, Michael Sullivan grabbed the Elite by the neck and brought its head down through his deployed wrist blade. The sharp blade of molecule obsidian gouged through the weakened shields of the alien and pierced the skull, plunged through the brain and emerged between the creature's beady and predatory eyes. Michael pulled up and cleaved the head in two, armor coated in the beast's blue blood.

Lasky felt the creature go limp and the fingers loose their grip. He fell to the ground with a groan and the deactivated energy sword clattered to the ground beside him.

Sullivan walked over to Lasky and offered his hand. Lasky grabbed it and pulled himself up, leaned against his friend and tried to regain his balance. His face place depolarized. "Thanks."

Sully gave a curt nod. "Of course."

"What should we do about the others?" Lasky asked, looking towards the cleaved bodies of their squad mates.

Reaching for the pouch at the small of his back, Michael retrieved three dog dags. "I have their tags, that's all."

Lasky wanted to deliver a retort but decided against it. He could barely keep his eyes open—much less debate the merits of leaving the eviscerated bodies of his subordinates behind.
"Oh...okay."

There was a roar of engines followed by the screech of hundreds of Covenant Banshees and Seraphs that boomed across the landscape and toppled mountains damaged from debris falling from orbit. Boulders splashed into the blood red and orange sea like a clan of seals. The Covenant Battle Cruiser took position over the capital of Rendella. Tiny fires dominated the towering skyscrapers that once had been a tourist attraction, but now, many had fallen and the dominating form of the CCS-class Battle Cruiser loomed over them. The Banshees and other smaller vessels formed around the Battle Cruiser in a tight trapezoidal formation. There was a loud boom and the droning voice of an alien echoed through the area. It spoke with an alien tongue but Lasky could feel the emotion, feel the hatred behind every word. The belly of the Battle Cruiser flared a brilliant magenta and spat forth a pillar of energy and plasma. It touched the ground and in an instant, the entirety of the city was vaporized.

"We need to go, now!" Sully snarled. He started to haul his commanding officer towards the path which would lead to their extraction point. Hopefully, there would be some UNSC presence left on this world that could rescue them.

"Damn it, Sully. If you think I'm going to say leave me, you're dead wrong," Lasky stated, "That's so cliché anyhow."

"Yeah, I'm aware of that!" Michael responded, "They're going to start glassing the planet soon, we either need to find a deep titanium mine to hide in or get something with engines."

Lasky bit his bottom lip. "Why don't we just fly away on the wings of imagination?"

"Fuck off," Sullivan responded as he helped Lasky over a fallen tree.

"Jeez, I'm just saying..."

"Silence!" Sullivan spat.

Lasky was taken back by the hiss from his comrade but ignored it, deciding his colleague was simply reacting to stress and their current predicament in a manner appropriate, if a bit harsh.

"This is UNSC Anubis, we are en route to your position. White Tail Actual?" Lasky's ear piece buzzed.

Thomas reached up and tapped it. "This is White Tail Actual, we are en route. Two White Tails down; Buck and Devil Horn still active."

"Understood White Tail Actual," The person on the other line drawled, "Once on board we will evacuate out of system. Admiral Moore has authorized the Rotten Apple."

Lasky felt the hairs on his neck raise; the Rotten Apple was a procedure which involved detonating fourteen Shiva-grade Nukes underneath the surface of the planet and along tectonic fault lines. Massive segments of matter would be instantaneously ripped away and the structural support of the planet would collapse within a few hours, thus rendering the affected world the resemblance of a rotten, decayed and crushed apple.

It was standard procedure once a world fell into Covenant hands; scorched Earth policy. Deny the enemy any resources; organic and mechanical and terrestrial.

The roar of the prowler Anubis' engines boomed across the sky as the sleek, black vessel descended from the heavens. Sickly gray and black storm clouds broke apart as her sharp, dart like structures pierced them. Lasky noticed that following her were several Covenant corvettes. Bolts of plasma and missiles streaked after the human craft as it rolled away to engage. Flares fell from her tips and provided temporary respite from the attack as the missiles and bolts turned away to face the decoys.

The small 168mm Magnetic Accelerator Cannon that armed the prowler had emerged from its position on the ventral side, rotating to face the attackers' bridges and fired. A half-ton round streaked through the air and struck the lead Corvette's bridge. The unshielded vessel, an anomaly in the Covenant fleet, crumbled inwards as the round penetrated through it length-wise. It blew out the back side of the engine, continuing on and clip the tail of the other escort Corvette. The lead Corvette belched flame, debris and crew as it careened towards the ocean. Consumed in purple, blue and pink fire from the plasma, the rapidly dying vessel gave out a painful and deafening screech as several hundred tons of metal slammed into the water. The spray from the collision reached up several kilometers and the resulting wave was large enough to easily consume the island.

"This is Anubis Retrieval, activate MPEDs immediately White Tail Actual."

Lasky punched a series of buttons on his wrist's gauntlet and then one on his shoulder. His backpack activated and so did the Man Portable Extraction Device. High powered magnetic carbyne-fiber robes no thicker than a Human hair streaked upwards several kilometers and attached to the magnetic underside of Anubis. He felt a kick and he was ripped upwards at 4 gravities, Michael Sullivan next to him. There was a violent jar and Lasky felt his back slam into the metal. Hydraulics activated and the small magnetic patch he and Sully were attached to recessed into the hull of the Prowler, replaced by abyss-black hull armor.

Lasky felt his world spin as the plate was rotated upwards and to the side. A brief flash of blinding light gave way to a small but busy hangar with various stealth vehicles and Naval Combat Teams milling about. The magnets deactivated and Lasky and Sully slid onto the deck of the Anubis.

"All hands, this is Anubis Control, we are leaving Rendella. Make preparations for slipspace jump."

Lasky looked over to Sully and found nothing, the man had vanished like a ghost with only the dull echoes of footsteps following behind him.

Feeling something in the palm of his hand, Lasky looked down to find the bronze and silver emblem of Cerberus, the three headed canine that guarded the gates to Hell.

It was Sullivan's.

****UNSC Fat Boy-One****

****Re purposed for Diplomatic Duties****

****August 24th, 2184****

"It's good to know...that we aren't alone," The man known as Michael Sullivan said calmly. He sat in a high-backed, unadorned chair of oddly-ergonomic magnesium and polycarbonate. There was a table before him of polished aluminum with a small array of appetizers and a pitcher of water and, formerly, a duo of glasses at the center, one of which was in the hands of Admiral Thomas Lasky.

"How did you get here?" Lasky asked, wrapping his hands around a glass of water. He leaned forward on his elbows, eyes studying his old friend's features.

The Illusive Man sighed. "In 2542, as you and Admiral Cole began the battle of Psi Serpentis, I was deployed on the Anubis. We were supposed to place monitors and sensor buoys in the system to watch for signs of Covenant activity. The inner colony of New Georgia was a couple of lightyears away, right in the path of the Covenant. If we could get an early warning, we could start evacuating. Start running."

"But something went wrong," Lasky stated.

"Yes. As the Anubis started laying the monitors, a Covenant attack fleet dropped from Slipspace," the Illusive Man said. "Have you ever

seen a Covenant war fleet numbering in the dozens? The particles from FTL slowly come off of them like water off a speeding vehicle. They glisten like the diamonds from Saturn's atmosphere."

Lasky nodded. "I was on the UNSC Brilliance, one of the Cruisers that Cole took with him to Psi Serpentis. We had the fifth highest kill-rate out of the thirteen Cruisers."

Ignoring the response, the Illusive Man continued, "We went into the atmosphere of a gas giant sixty times the size of Jupiter. The thing was ready to become a star. A Covenant Super Carrier followed after us, a 26 kilometer long monstrosity of metal and death. We were about to evade when something in our subsystems went wrong and sent a signal. The split-lips started firing, pumping so much energy into the star that we were only a few minutes from being inside a newborn star. Then it happened, a subsystem activated and launched one of our nukes directly into the heart of the gas giant. It exploded, we tried a slipspace jump but there was weird radiation and energy particles present and we managed to get part of the way into the stream when we suddenly dropped out."

"And the stars didn't match their original location, there was no Covenant fleet." Lasky finished the Illusive Man's statement.

"Correct." The Illusive Man, once known as Michael Sullivan, cracked a weak smile. "I bet you have, Mr. Lasky. Now, do tell me, are there additional survivors besides just yourself?" He already knew the answer but wanted to continue playing the game.

The man sitting across from him, flanked by eight standing giants clad in a dull, charcoal gray armor responded after having a bite of a buttered cracker and a drink of water, "We've found a lot in the few months we've been stuck here...we've done a lot. We found an additional UNSC Cruiser and the Spirit of Fire."

"That's brilliant to hear." Michael Sullivan leaned back slightly and the four Cerberus guards flanking him moved back ever so. "Interesting, a few months you say?"

"Yes, a few months," Lasky responded.

"I've been here for nearly fifty years, stuck in a galaxy of hostility and brutal beasts lusting for the blood of man." Michael Sullivan leaned forward and grabbed a strip of venison and plopped it into his mouth, relishing the flavor and spices.

"Fifty years?" Lasky asked in disbelief, "Doctor Tillson is definitely correct then in her belief that time flows differently here."

"Yes." The Illusive Man retrieved another strip of the smoked and seasoned meat. "Whomever prepared this meat should be rewarded, it is delectable."

Lasky moved his glass of water to the side. "Why did you make contact with us?"

The Illusive Man shrugged. "We were in the neighborhood...eliminating certain issues that might cause the Systems Alliance some

difficulties."

Lasky's head cocked to the side slightly and the lighting of the room, once a cargo bay, made him appear ten years older with crows' feet nipping at his eyes and graying strands in his hair. Sullivan noticed that absent from the warming lights of Infinity, his old friend seemed truly old. "They do have a military, you know that, right?"

The Illusive Man gave his friend a hearty nod. "Of course, but I typically solve issues that the Alliance is too..." he struggled to find the correct word for a brief moment, "paralyzed to respond to."

"Such as?" Lasky questioned.

"Pirates, slavers, Batarian War Lords." The Illusive Man leaned forward, tenting his fingers. "The wolves in space that will not ignore Humanity's cry for peace, much less friendship."

"That is unfortunate," Lasky responded, "but typical. Since we won the war against the Covenant, we've been attacked by all manner of factions; Elites, Brutes, hell, even Jackals."

The Illusive Man was quiet for a moment. "When you mean 'won the war', to what extent?"

"Every side lost horribly but are too prideful to admit that they lost." Lasky cracked a meager grin that was more of bleakness than genuine joy. "That's what has happened."

"Reminds me much of the First Contact War that occurred when the Alliance went to war with the Turians," The Illusive Man commented. "I assume you are familiar with the First Contact War?"

Lasky nodded. "I am."

"Excellent," Michael Sullivan responded. His jovial expression darkened. "So it is very surprising that you decided to become buddy-buddy with the Turians instead of siding with the Alliance and elevating Humanity to a status of power."

Admiral Lasky sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of his nose. "We aren't here to affect and overthrow the base of power in the galaxy..."

"You did so, simply by you being here."

"Let me finish, Sullivan." Lasky made eye-contact with his old friend. "We know we are more powerful, we know that if we wanted too, we could burn them all. But we aren't, we won't. We just want to live out our lives here, in our little star system of Calvary. We have no interests in being gods or kings or idols."

The Illusive Man chuckled. "How naive of you to assume that, honestly."

"It's hardly naive, Sullivan." Lasky placed his hands flat on the brushed aluminum of the table. "We want to be left alone, go about our business and not be thrown into whatever events are occurring

within this galaxy. We've tried to be left alone but for some god damned reason, everybody seems to want us!"

Sullivan cocked an eyebrow. "Perhaps it is because you and your vessel are the most powerful forces this galaxy has ever seen short of the mythical Reapersâ€"a creature which you dispatched quite efficiently. To the galaxy, you are flying around in your super ship like a bunch of, pardon my French, Admiral, assholes."

Lasky gave him a look of disbelief and revulsion. "Hardly, we just want to be left alone, and outside of retrieving our own people and getting settled in, our affairs in this galaxy have been absolutely minimal. I really do not care if we aren't in the galaxy getting our asses handed to us or being white knights. Yeah, we're not the best, but we just want to be left alone!"

"So, it wasn't you who began attacking Batarian worlds and leaving them devoid of life?" Michael Sullivan already knew the answer to that. The Ascension had begun, the Ascension had claimed its first victims. He Who Catalogs was rebuilding his forces and sowing his seeds of insurrection across the Galaxy for when the rest of his nigh-innumerable forces swarmed from the relays and the eddies of Slipspace.

"No," Lasky responded.

"Well, that's unsettling to know," the Illusive Man responded.

"How so?" Lasky asked.

"Because, if not you, then there is another force in which a single ship can plow through several thousand warships and darken the sky of a world."

"The Infinity couldn't even do that." Lasky's brow furled.

"Precisely, in that case..."

"Those Reapers have come..." Lasky's eyes widened, connecting the dots. The Gray team report, the AI battles, the Collector attacks, the psychic scream, the whispers at the back of the crew's mind, the Reaper attack a day previous, the sudden drops in temperature...it all made sense.

"With that now out of the way," The Illusive Man said, "would you be interested in joining a mutual defense pact with Cerberus?"

"I find it suspicious that you would readily give up the location of your base of operations," Lasky said.

The Illusive Man shrugged. "I trust you. Do you trust me?"

Thomas was taken back by the question and remained silent for several seconds. "I don't know..."

"Please, you must," The Illusive Man said, standing from his seat and walking towards Lasky. There was a clatter of metal as the Spartan Fire Teams encircled the Admiral and raised their weapons. Several hardlight and energy shield projections snapped into existence as

well, creating a solid wall of energy, metal and sheer mass to protect the commander of the UNSC Infinity.

Lasky stood and pushed himself through the throng of Spartans to stand at arm's length away from his former friend. "Sully, if I came back from the dead with a new face and a new name, would you trust me?"

The Illusive Man had not expected this question and he remained silent for a brief few seconds before muttering, "No."

"What?" Lasky said, pushing Michael Sullivan further.

"No." The Illusive Man's voice rose to echo through the cavern.

"I'm sorry, Michael, but I can't trust you...not after all these years." Lasky hurt inside. Sullivan was, or had been, his closest friend during the war and before his disappearance.

The Illusive Man's face changed demeanor incredibly quick. What once had been an expression of pleading and sorrow was now one of steeled resolve and indifference. "Very well."

Lasky put his hand on Michael Sullivan's shoulder. "We won't do anything to interfere with your operations, nor will we attack or defend you."

"We shall do the same," Sullivan responded in a short, clipped tone.

"It was good to see you again," Lasky said, offering his hand.

The Illusive Man grabbed it. "It was. I hope next time we meet, you can trust me."

"I hope you perform an action that will allow me to do just that," Lasky said.

Lasky's earpiece buzzed. "Admiral, this is Roland. We have a communications packet from Admiral Cole. Priority is urgent."

"Understood, Roland. We are leaving now." Lasky started to walk towards the landed Pelican gunship at the far end of the hangar, the two Spartan Fire Teams following him closely. Fire Team Iron surrounded him and Fire Team Kodiak covered their six, weapons locked and ready to fire.

Lasky ascended the ramp into the Pelican and stopped at the threshold. He turned on his heel and gave Michael Sullivan a sharp salute. His friend returned it before starting off towards his own transport. "Good luck, Sully," Lasky whispered before taking his seat. The Spartans followed suit quickly, raising the ramp and sealing it shut.

Lasky stood and walked to the cockpit. "Get us out of here."

"Sir?" the pilot asked, "Shouldn't we wait until they have left? It's customary."

Lasky locked eyes with the pilot. "Get us clear, Lieutenant." His voice was firm and sent a chill up the pilot's spine.

"Sir!" the pilot responded. He punched in several commands and Lasky could feel the multi-ton gunship transport activate its engines and lift off the surface. Anti-gravity and nuclear engines activated and sent the Pelican hurtling out of the hangar. There was a brief static buzz as it bypassed the energy shield keeping the atmosphere in but after that, there were just stars.

"Squadrons Alpha through Echo, converge on Infinity Actual's Pelican. Assume sentinel formation," Commander Sebastian's voice said over the radio. In a few short seconds several hundred of the fast UNSC Broadsword fighters and dozens of the larger Longsword interceptors descended on the small Pelican, encircling it like a school of fish. Infinity loomed massively in the distance, her broadside presented and her hangars awaiting the return of her commander.

Lasky turned to Lieutenant Commander Cooper. "So, that didn't go as well as I had hoped."

"Agreed, sir," the Spartan Fire Team commander responded. He reached up with both hands, his DMR across his lap, and took off his MJOLNIR/WARRIOR-variant helmet, revealing short cut black hair and a thin goatee.

"What's your opinion on this, Commander?" Lasky asked, leaning against the bulkhead and crossing his arms.

The Spartan shrugged. "I'm not exactly sure, but I don't believe that Michael Sullivan will react well to your refusal to enter an alliance."

Lasky did not respond for a moment. "Do you think I made the right choice?"

"Yes," Was the Spartan's response. It was blunt and devoid of any doubt.

"I would have entered into an alliance in a heart beat if he was still Michael Sullivan...not The Illusive Man," Lasky commented, "That wasn't the Sully I knew...after Rendella he was different. Colder. Silent. Angry."

"He seemed...odd," Cooper responded, "He went from happy to cold and everything in between in a matter of a few seconds."

"I noticed that as well," Lasky said, "he was erratic."

"He's dangerous," Cooper commented. "Sir, your face when he told you about the Anubis. I've seen that look before, sir. Its usually when someone knows something."

Lasky sighed and looked down. "Yeah. I know about the Anubis."

"How, sir?" Cooper asked, "If you don't mind my asking."

"We got information that a Covenant force was going to be making a routine stop in the system. We also knew that Anubis was the closest vessel with a large nuclear payload. We told the Captain this and he

agreed to do whatever was necessary, so, ONI had me write a program to lure the Covenant vessels in to the star and then detonate a nuclear warhead strong enough that it would cause the gas giant to go solar. I did so and when I received the final confirmation that contact had been made, I sent a slipstream command to activate the program. I was responsible for the death of ninety-two people but we managed to destroy at least a dozen Covenant ships."

"We did things like that all the time during the war, you know that? Sacrifice is essential to survival, and we all did what was necessary." Cooper's voice was hard as was his expression of relentlessness. "Was that your darkest moment, sir? In all honesty?"

"And worse...things that are beyond top secret," Lasky responded. "There are secrets to what we did, how we did it. The years of when I was in NAVSPECWAR were some of the darkest things I've ever seen. If these came to light, we'd all be hung for crimes against humanity."

"Crimes against humanity?" Cooper questioned, "How so?"

"We weren't fighting only Covenant during the war, Commander. The Innies were starting to rise up again. Have you ever seen a UNSC fleet get caught in a cross fire between a Covenant armada and an Insurrectionist controlled planet?" Lasky inquired, "The Innies purge most of the planet's population, send nukes to hit the major cities from stolen silos and then target the orbital and terrestrial MAC guns onto UNSC targets. For what? It's because they want to send a message...we addressed the colonies' concerns a hundred years ago. These people aren't divine, they are terrorists."

"Sir?" Cooper asked. The amount of venom that Lasky's tone conveyed could down a charging Brute.

"Sorry," Lasky said, "I get carried away sometimes."

"I can tell," Cooper said. "Sir, can I ask you something again?"

"Yes."

"Do you feel sorry that you sacrificed ninety-two people including your best friend?"

"I don't know...but I really think Michael knows what happened that day."

****Cerberus Shuttle****

****En route to Cerberus Flagship****

The Illusive Man's eyes stared blankly at the window as cosmic debris, some Cerberus, some Reaper, some asteroid, zipped past. His fleet loomed in the distance, some ships still showing signs of the battle with the Infinity the day prior.

The Cerberus troops that had escorted him to the failed meeting sat in front of him on the opposite side of the vessel. They still had their helmets on except for the officer who had his own off and was

staring at the Illusive Man.

The head of Cerberus turned. "What?" He asked.

"That meeting could have gone better."

"Obviously," The Illusive Man responded with a snarl, "Everything could have gone better."

"That Admiral Lasky is a fool," the Cerberus officer commented. "By denying our request for a defense pact, he puts all of humanity at risk, more so than even the Alliance."

The Illusive Man sighed. "I am aware of that, Officer. I hardly need reminding."

"My apologies."

Holding up a hand, the Illusive Man silenced the soldier. "No need."

"Yes, sir."

The Illusive Man's hand rested on the hilt of his M-3 Predator pistol and he made eye-contact with the Cerberus officer. "Say my name."

"Sir?" The officer was confused.

"Say my name," the Illusive Man requested, "come on."

"Michael Sullivan." The officer bowed his head.

"Yes." The Illusive Man unholstered his pistol and fired, a loud metallic boom with an electric whine filling the cabin. The heavy caliber round streaked across the compartment and caused the man's head to explode, showering his companions with flesh, blood and brain. The Illusive Man moved to the other three Cerberus personnel and fired again in rapid succession and before the barrel had even finished cooling, four headless bodies collapsed onto the ground.

The shuttle came to a halt and landed with a resounding clank. Turning, the Illusive Man dropped the door to the shuttle and stepped out onto the blinding white light of the hangar. General Weir was there standing before him with his executive officer. Both men looked uncomfortable. Sullivan did not know if it was from the fact he had emerged from the shuttle alone or that his eyes were mad.

"Sir, it is good to see you again." Weir stepped forward and presented his hand. The Illusive Man stepped forward and revealed his pistol. He slammed the barrel into Weir's chest, precisely where the heart was and fired. There was a shower of blood and the former General fell to the ground, gasping for breath and bleeding profusely as the majority of his inner body cavity had been reduced to a pulped mass. The General's final few moments of life were short, bloody and incredibly painful.

The Illusive Man turned to the executive officer. "Colonel Packard, you are hereby in command and promoted to the rank of General of the

Cerberus fleet."

General Brett Packard stammered and delivered a clumsy salute. His white and black uniform had been sprayed with blood from his predecessor's execution. "Thank you, sir."

"Now, one quick question." The Illusive Man put the pistol in his holster but did not activate the safety.

"What is it?" Brett Packard responded, panicked.

"What's my name?"

"Unknown. You are simply referred to as the Illusive Man."

Michael Sullivan smiled warmly and for General Packard, it was the most terrifying thing he had seen all day. "Good job. Have the helm set a course for home and burn the bodies of Weir and the assault squad in the shuttle."

"Understood," responded General Packard, "Anything else?"

"Yes, in fact." The Illusive Man walked past the General. "I want the command staff who were present when the first contact took place to be disposed of. We have more than enough officers willing to service the bridge."

"Yes, sir," Brett responded, swallowing nervously. "I'll see to it immediately." His voice was shaky and uneven.

"Thank you. If you need me I'll be in the observation deck," the Illusive Man responded. He calmly walked away and this time, when the searing pain of Bias' presence arrived, he did not flinch or scream or gasp.

He embraced it.

"We have much to do."

****UNSC Infinity****

****Bridge****

"Welcome back, sir." Roland flared into existence on top of the holotable. "Did you enjoy your trip?"

Lasky shook his head. "No." He walked past the tiny, orange AI and to the expansive bridge windows. "Status on rescuing the survivors?"

"All Fire Teams are back on board and the survivors of the prison camp are in quarantine. We're drawing up names, ranks and branches of service before we contact the Systems Alliance in regards to us retrieving several dozen of their soldiers," Roland reported, "Oh, and we're going to have to repair Pelican 62-2, she took heavy damage during the landing. Broadwords are returning to bays."

"Understood. Losses?" Lasky asked.

"Minimal. Four Marines were killed and we lost a Broadsword and her

pilot to enemy triple-a that was concealed." Roland snapped his fingers and a render of the anti-air battery snapped into existence. "Standard Mantis class Point Defense Plasma Cannon, took care of it with an Onager round from battery 9."

"Not bad," Lasky commented, "how many Marines could we bring back?"

"Zero, the Brutes used plasma grenades to eliminate them," Roland said. The typical plasma grenade was equivalent to a 120mm air-burst flak round in terms of destructive power. The only things that had remained of the Marines were a few bits of shredded armor.

Lasky let out a heavy sigh. "Understood."

"The diplomatic Fat Boy is engaging engines and making her way back," Roland said.

"Lieutenant Austen, target the Fat Boy with Archer battery A1. Prep three missiles for salvo fire," Lasky called out.

"Sir?" Roland asked, "Why are we destroying it?"

"I don't trust Sullivan to not have done anything to that vessel or to not place stealth operatives on board." Lasky knew that that would happen; it was something he would have done. If it were not for the heavy radiation shielding covering the hull and the anti-spying measures he had ordered installed before the meeting convened, he could scan and see if his belief was correct. But now, he had to go with the assumption that Michael Sullivan had put fail safes into measure.

"Understood," Lieutenant Austen responded. He primed three missiles and miles below deck, three high-powered Archer missiles were transported on anti-gravity beams into position and locked into their target. In less than a fifth of a second after inputting the command, the missiles were ready.

The eighth screen on Austen's station switched over to a targeted view of the condemned Fat Boy. "Archers one through three firing." He smashed the firing stud and the trio of high-powered missiles rippled away from Infinity at insane velocities. "Archers one through three away."

The missiles made a wide turn and started to rapidly corkscrew. Tungsten darts shot out from the very tip of the warheads, streaking forward and softening the location where the missiles would hit. The tungsten darts were only effective against Covenant shields which commonly could be semi-weakened by close-range, high velocity darts. Noticeably absent from the lumbering, drone-transport were those shields and so the missiles hit in rapid succession, tearing chunks away from the transport and vaporizing it. One could easily have done it; three was overkill.

"Target destroyed."

Lasky turned away from the window and paced back to the holotable. "Now, what is this priority transmission we received?" He asked Roland.

Roland snapped his fingers and the mug of Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole appeared. "Infinity Actual, this is Everest Actual. We have received a priority transmission from that Commander Shepard. He has managed to arrange a meeting with you and the Systems Alliance committee for extrasolar human affairs. I'd love to join you but we've started getting additional whispers on the edge of the system. We think that they are more of the hostiles that attacked us earlier. Cutter has the Spirit of Fire up and running and the Obsidians are at full battle preparation status. Everest is ready too, so whatever comes through space, we'll be ready. I want you to go and take care of this and, if anything weird happens there, be sure to assist the Alliance. If there's a war about to happen, we're going to need all the help we can get. Good luck, Tom. Cole, out"

"What does that man think he's doing?" Lasky muttered. The Spirit of Fire was not a battle cruiser. It was, at best, a long range bombardment vessel with nowhere near the power generation potential of the Everest or of Infinity.

"He is Admiral-I-blow-you-and-your-solar-system-up Cole..." Roland pointed out, letting the comment hang in the air, "I'm sure whatever space squid decides to take him on will have all the life expectancy of a piece of lettuce at a vegan all-you-can-eat buffet."

Lasky cracked a grin. "Very true. Before we head out, send him a data packet pertaining to how to combat these Reapers at long-range and about the psychic scream we experienced."

"Already did," Roland respond.

"DevÃ©ro, spool up the slipspace drive and set a course for the Sol system, full speed. Lieutenant Austen, once we drop out I want shields to maximum and point defenses running. I don't think they cleared out their system of stellar debris as well as we did." Lasky brought his hands to the small of his back. "Oh, and have Lieutenant Commander Cooper and his squad get in their dress blues, they'll be escorting me down. One side arm is allowed." Lasky paused his thought. "Oh, Sebastian, I want Broadsword squadrons Alpha through Echo prepped for escort."

"Making a show, sir?" Lieutenant Austen asked.

Lasky nodded. "Yes. If they are going to be asking if we want to be their friend, we might as well show what our enemies will experience if they choose that route."

Roland gave Lasky a puzzled look. "Sir, you are seriously antagonizing them at this point."

"No, I'm not," Lasky retorted.

Roland's face became stern. "Yes...yes you are!"

"Roland, watch your tongue." Lasky leveled a glare at his Artificial Intelligence. He would not have someone questioning his command, especially someone without a rank, technically.

"Admiral Lasky, I have full control over this ship. Unless you stop treating the Alliance like a bunch of enemies, I will not allow this vessel to enter slipspace. Your attitude is a major threat to this

vessel and to its crew."

Lasky eased his expression. "Understood, Roland."

Roland nodded. "I don't know what has gotten into you as of late, Admiral. Your behavior has been erratic and you just seem off."

Lasky hesitated a response, judging his own conscience whether or not he wanted to say what was on his mind. He decided so. "Just working through some memories and past experiences. Dust and echoes and shadows." He responded; he was not used to being dressed down in this fashion.

"I understand that, sir," Roland responded, eyes betraying the stoic expression he maintained. He was unrelenting and Lasky could sense anger and disappointment in his voice. The tiny Artificial Intelligence gave off such...human emotion that it pierced Lasky harder than any dressing down from his crew or his commanding officers. "But you can not allow that to affect your judgment and commonsense. Is that understood?"

Lasky was taken back by his friend's powerful statement. "Yes...yes, it is."

"Thank you, Admiral." Roland's hue seemed to shift slightly, likely as his emotions fell. "I would have rather not aborted a slipspace jump. You may proceed."

Lasky nodded. "Helm, get us into slipspace. Lieutenant Austen, stand down point defenses. Follow the coordinates they gave us."

"Yes, sir."

****UNSC Freelancer****

****En route to Geth space****

Distant shadows.

Distant echoes.

John's blurry vision filled his conscious as his eyes fluttered open to be greeted with an oily, blurred shadow looming in front of him. He felt cold and he did not feel the conforming gel of the Mjolnir armor against his skin. His mind felt cluttered, like there were four people speaking at once. He tried to move, trying to move his arms but failed. His control was gone and this feeling was all too familiar.

Except this time, there was no sand.

No epitaph.

No Mendicant Bias.

But there was a Didact. A tall imposing figure dressed in intricate armor played host to John's mind, oblivious to the mental stow away status of the Spartan. John could feel the anguish, the sadness and the regret almost as if...he was experiencing it...no, he was

experiencing it. He felt these as if they were his own.

Large, six-fingered hands worked slowly and calmly across hardlight control panels glowing with a plethora of runes, scripts and symbols of a thousand different meanings and a million different shapes. The room was large, empty save for a large ring-shaped structure that he presently stood on. Seven large holographic rings hung in the middle of the platform.

John recognized the room, the platform.

The rings.

He stood in the control room of Installation 04. Halo.

"The final preparations are ready," came a bubbly voice from behind him.

John's host turned to face the voice and revealed a small, floating orb of silvery metal with a single blue eye embedded in its casing.

"Thank you, Chakas," John's host responded, voice steady but steeled.

"It is my duty, IsoDidact," 343 Guilty Spark responded, approaching John's host and taking up position a few meters away, "And I shall stand by your side until the final action is completed and until the galaxy slumbers."

John's host held up a hand. "I don't deserve to be called that after what I am about to do."

"It is your name, your role," 343 Guilty Spark said, "a single action can not change that."

The IsoDidact looked up to his old, formerly-human friend. "I am the Didact, I am not meant to murder trillions to stop billions."

Even through his metal chassis, John could see the perplexed expression of 343 bleed through. Outlines started to fill John's vision. John's image of the AI morphed into a small human with an almost primal-look but with caring eyes that extruded wit and compassion and resolve. So much resolve.

"You kill them to spare them, you know that right?" 343 responded quietly, human emotion lacing his voice. "A life in chains of abomination is not a life in the least. When that energy wave hits them, they might curse you now but they will pray to you later...much later."

John felt his host sigh. "There will be nothing left to remember us by, just empty ruins with shadows and whispers and unanswered questions." He looked up. "Children will look up to the stars, at our monumental ruins, and ask what happened...what happened all those years ago."

"You are not the only one that has been forced to make this decision," a voice boomed through the chamber. The hologram of the Halos flickered into nonexistence, now dominated by a large

insect-creature. Something at John's core seemed to shrink away in fear or by conditioning. Simply seeing the image caused a feeling of absolute dread and inferiority.

Guilty Spark emitted a tortured scream and fell to the floor, sparking. John recognized the behavior; it was an electromagnetic pulse, something so powerful that it could fry a normal human's nervous system.

John could feel strength and resolve course through his host's mind as the Forerunner, this IsoDidact stood tall and chin high. He had seen this creature before and had defeated it before. "Why have you come now, beast?" The IsoDidact roared, "Are you here to embed even more guilt into my being?"

The Beast's mandibles clicked like an insect's. "I come not to guilt you...I come to reassure you...to tell you."

A sense of inescapable rage consumed the IsoDidact. "Tell me what, plague?"

"You are not the first to have to kill so many," the Beast roared, "You are not alone...you are just another."

"Another what?" the IsoDidact asked, "I have no time for your games, sickness."

"Another Didact, another burner of the stars."

"There are others?"

"Four." The Beast's projection vanished and voice abruptly changed in location and tone. The IsoDidact turned towards the exit to watch as the Librarian, his wife eternal, slowly glided forward. Her pale eyes burned with azure light and energetic particles fell off her form. Her appearance reminded John of a galaxy whose stars glowed gold.

The Librarian's mirage waved her hand and four dominating shadows consumed the chamber, reaching high into the kilometer-tall ceiling and twisting and contorting. All were vaguely humanoid and cloaked in armors and robes.

"You were chosen to lead your people in their hour of need...their hour of defeat," the Beast-Librarian said. Her gentle hand graced the IsoDidact's cheek and John could feel the warmth, even though she did not touch his skin. A flood of emotions overcame him; joy, happiness...terror. "One of four, two previous to you, one to come."

The IsoDidact craned his neck. "Who else has had to make this decision, to end so many?"

"Your predecessor, Shadow of Sundered Stars...your Ur-Didact, had to kill all of humanity to save the lives of trillions." One of the shadows broke apart into oily black strands. "The Forerunner who led your kind against us all those years ago. Do you remember his name? A name that even now still echoes through the stars?"

The IsoDidact remained silent for a moment before his lips broke

apart into a defeated, straight line. "Observer of Blinding Phenomena. The Blind Didact."

The answer did not seem to please the Beast-Librarian and her eyes glowed even more intensely. "Once more."

"Observer of Blinding Phenomena. The Blind Didact." The IsoDidact's voice was firm this time, steady and unrelenting. Another shadow broke apart. "The One who brought light to the darkness, the one who screamed into space and whose cry rang through every system, every galaxy, every supernova, all the way to the great galactic string walls."

The Beast-Librarian smirked. "Do tell me, why does your kind call him the Blind Didact?"

"He is called the Blind Didact because after what he did, he was too ashamed to watch the world he had built. So he blinded himself; peered directly into the pulse of a exploding hypernova."

"My, you and your people sure do enjoy idolizing a man who butchered a quintillion, butchered the species that has outlived entire universes and whose arrival ushered in this one." She let out a tortured laugh. "The Blind Didact was a fool, a murderer, and a being with no conscience."

"Your kind tried to stomp us out for disobeying your orders, your vision for us." The IsoDidact's retort was emotional and John felt the anguish seething at the back of his mind. "What explanation do you have for that?"

She smirked. "You weren't right for the Mantle. You weren't ready."

"Then who was?"

"The fourth...the fourth Didact," the Beast-Librarian said, "A human with your soul, the soul of all combined."

"Why?!" The IsoDidact roared, "Why will there be another Didact? Another murderer?"

"My dear...my dear," she said in a whisper, "There will always be a Didact. And there will always be a being wearing a dead man's face."

John's vision exploded.

His vision cleared and John shot up from the ground. There was a sickly red klaxon spilling out light and a scream. He looked over his shoulder and saw that when his helmeted head had hit the wall, he had left a sizable impression in the metal.

"Commander," Jerome-092 called out, rushing forward to John. Quickly checking his Commander's vital signs, the Spartan-II helped his superior up off the ground. "You okay, sir?"

John nodded. There was still a sense of spinning and a chill up his spine. "Yes, Petty Officer." John bent down and retrieved his assault rifle and examined it. "Report."

"We hit some sort of slipspace turbulence. Cortana said it was like a big wave crashing against a speed boat. There were hull breaches on decks three and nine, complete depressurization on deck five and we lost habitation zone four. Five Marines, six officers and two off-duty Spartans were pulled into the stream before hard-shields turned on." Jerome's voice was laced with professionalism but there was an underlying tone of sadness.

"We should have been there already," John commented. He ran the math in his head and it turned out, roughly. The Geth system was only a couple dozen lightyears away. Had the wave affected the transit?

"Agreed, sir. Helm says that our velocity dropped rapidly and the stream started getting harder to navigate," Petty Officer Jerome-092 responded, "Actual says we're clear and we're about to drop out and I've sent Venator to seal up and get the Pelicans ready for launch."

"Why wasn't I woken earlier?" John asked. By all accounts the wave sounded like it had hit a few hours ago.

"Sorry about that, Commander. Your active camouflage was turned on when you fell. Luckily, when you came about, it dropped."

John remained silent and checked his suit's systems. They were mostly undamaged but his active camouflage generator would need to be replaced. They were incredibly delicate and tended to break when a half-ton super soldier landed on them. "We should head to the bridge." John's tone was noticeably absent...distant.

"Agreed, sir."

There was a flash of radiation and tortured energetic particles as Freelancer and her Geth escorts punched their way out of the slipstream space dimension. Energetic particles of brilliant colors fell off their hulls like water on speeding cars. The gas and energy cloud resulting from the creation of the slipspace portal broke apart and dissipated, leaving a faint cloud behind of green and yellow and purple.

Instantly, Freelancer took evasive maneuvers as a large chunk of space debris, fringes still red-hot from weapons fire, drifted closer. There were smaller pieces of debris following it as it plowed through asteroids, other debris and towards the Geth vessels. The lateral railguns on the human destroyer activated and spat out white-hot projectiles. The debris spun in space before a Onager's round sent it hurtling into the distance.

Jennifer Ansil's knuckles were white as she brutally gripped the brass railing, eyes trained ahead at the swirling planet below and the gigatonnes of debris. They were just over 200,000 kilometers out from geosynchronous orbit but even from that distance, puffs of light, gas and debris were easily visible.

"Shields up?" Ansil asked.

Cortana nodded. "They are. I've rerouted nonessential power to bow shield generators if we need it."

"Thank you," Jennifer responded. Something was wrong; their Geth escorts had all but disappeared and there were almost zero transmissions being sent besides the radio signals being pumped out from what appeared to be a rapidly dying star spitting out a surprisingly powerful pulsar. The star, if her sensors were right, was not that much older than Earth's. Too young to be a neutron star. Its gravitational collapse was entirely artificial along with its previous supernova.

"Ma'am, I think you might want to look at this," Cortana said. Her tiny avatar flared into existence and Jennifer walked back to it, arms crossed.

"Show me," Jennifer ordered. She turned her head for a fraction of a minute. "Sonnenburg, continue on a course for geosynchronous orbit. Keep shields up and have main batteries charged and loaded."

"Yes, ma'am!" Charles Sonnenburg responded. He quickly input a series of commands and Ansil could feel the Ether core at the heart of her vessel start gobbling atoms and spitting out gigawatts of energy from each. "Engines at 110% thrust, maintaining for ten minutes and then will decrease to 50%."

Ansil turned back to Cortana. "Okay, so what do we have?"

The Smart A.I snapped her fingers and an overview of the system rendered. She walked through the hologram, taking up position near the only habitable one. "Well, according to me, the star in this system underwent a partial supernova. The four innermost planets are gone, the one we're about to orbit has major scorching and the atmosphere is gone. The gas giant in the system is large enough and dense enough to become a brown dwarf. If and when that happens, the eighty moons still intact will be completely consumed."

A chill went up Ansil's spine. The UNSC had experimented with artificial stellar collapse during the war but it had never come to fruition. It took too much energy, even for an Ether core, and too much time. They had tried inserting iron atoms into the star to attempt a gravitational collapse but that failed, they had tried detonating a slipspace bomb inside a star and it failed. Whatever had caused this star to die had obviously technology beyond anything the UNSC, or the local races of this galaxy, possessed.

"So someone nuked the system but didn't manage to fully wipe it out?" Jennifer asked, "Huh."

"Pretty much," Cortana said, "Based on the amount of debris that is around the star, I'd say that a Dyson shell with super-dense materials had been set up and that is what absorbed enough of the blast to spare the ships in the system that were in the shadow of planets." Her face soured. "A Dyson shell, absolutely brilliant. We tried building them but when the Ether core came about, they weren't needed anymore...but a race independently making one that covers several million kilometers. That's just...brilliant."

Jennifer's eyes were drifting off, carrying her thoughts. If that star had been artificially collapsed, then the people responsible could maybe make a Magnetar, a star with a magnetic field strong enough to pull particles into it from across a system and kill

everything. "Chances of this thing becoming a magnetar?"

Cortana frowned. "Just a second. Yeah, I have no clue. I don't think an AI has ever had to do the calculations...but...oh dear."

"Oh dear, what?" Jennifer asked. She turned her head. "Sonnenburg, spool up the Slipspace drive. We might have to jump out of here, quick."

Cortana walked over to the render of the brown dwarf and swiped her hand. The render dominated the table and Ansil's stomach sank when she saw the hundred black smears around the dying star. Leaning in, Jennifer braced herself against the edge of the holotable. "Can we clear it up?"

Cortana shook her head. "Radiation is too strong to get an accurate reading. I can try to sharpen the image."

"Okay," Jennifer nodded her head.

The image blurred and then solidified and the black smears became easily recognizable. There was a long, tear drop shaped main body with a mass of appendages. Just by viewing the image, the entire world seemed to slow and become painfully silent. Jennifer winced and turned away.

Cortana zoomed out from the star. "Those were..."

"The same ships that attacked that Citadel place," Ansil muttered. She felt something warm and wet trickle from her nose and she wiped it away with the cuff of her uniform, briefly looking down. "Blood?" She asked no one.

"Commander, I think it would be smart to go to action stations." Cortana's expression was painted with concern.

"Do it," Jennifer responded.

"Aye," Cortana responded. The bridge windows darkened and thick sheets of Aegis armor deployed followed shortly by the roar of hydraulics and anti-gravity systems as the multi-ton bridge was brought into the armor belt of the vessel.

"Approaching 50,000 kilometers out from planet," Sonnenburg called out.

"Understood!" Ansil responded, "Cortana, what do we know about the surviving vessels?"

"A collection of ships ranging from two-hundred meters up to two kilometers on both sides. Our escort have joined up with the faction closest to the planet I've coined Alpha-1. They have moved into a position to screen us as we assume orbit," Cortana told Ansil, "The amount of weapons fire being slung in between the two forces is insane. I count at least five Reapers in the attacking force...and...they've targeted us."

"Target them back," Ansil responded calmly. She turned away from the holotable and walked back to her perch by the brass railing. Her eyes drifted upwards to the massive displays hanging from the ceiling, "As

soon as they fire I want a full suppression barrage from Archer and Rapier pod A1 through E5. Bring suppression batteries online, fire on my order."

"Understood," the weapons officer called out, "batteries prepped."

"Helm, keep us on a course for orbit. Cortana, begin first contact procedures," Ansil said.

Cortana nodded. "Sending first contact package now." She shimmered as the transmission was two ways and with wide-eyes, she gasped. "So much information..."

Ansil recognized the shaking in the AI's voice. "Operations, cut all data streams on my order."

There was a flash of red and Cortana fell to her knees, hands clutching the side of her head. She screamed and lines of code began to spill off her sides, pooling onto the holotable. "They are calling me..." her eyes flicked upwards, "I'm going to them."

"Terminate the data transmission!" Ansil barked.

Cortana vanished before the link could be severed.

"Target the vessel that had the data connection!" Jennifer Ansil ordered. There was a grind of metal and the clank of boots as the door to the bridge opened. She turned to watch as Commander John-117 walked over the threshold. His armor shone from the light of the room and she could tell he was ready to deploy. Two M7S submachine guns were attached to either of his legs and a Basilisk Assault Rifle slung across his back. Even through his visor, Ansil could see the anger and passion in his eyes. "Commander, sir."

"Where is she?" Responded the towering Spartan, "Where's Cortana? She sent me a message to get to the bridge immediately a few seconds ago."

Ansil walked up to the Spartan. "The Geth sent something over our network that debilitated Cortana. She said she was going to go to them."

The Spartan neared closer to Ansil, a few inches from the naval officer's chest. He towered over her and looked directly down at her. "And you let her?"

Jennifer's lips formed into a thin line for a few seconds. She tried to back up but bumped into the brass rail. The sheer amount of emotion spilling off the Spartan and the tone of the warrior was vicious enough to break battle plate. "I had no choice, Commander."

John did not respond for a moment and instead let his sheer presence and unreadable facial expression speak for him. He stepped back, visor still staring blankly at Commander Ansil. "We are getting her back. She has classified information on UNSC strategy, force deployment and technology." I can't lose her, not again.

"That may not be feasible, not unless we want to start a war," Ansil

responded.

"We are getting her back." John's snarl was something new for him and he struggled to keep his anger down. He was not going to allow her to slip from his fingers, not again. "Helm officer, lay in a course for the Geth fleet."

"Sir?" Sonnenburg asked, "If we do that, we'll be in their weapons range."

"No, he's right. Chuck, lay in a course. All weapons go hot, prepare to fire on my order," Ansil said reluctantly.

"Yes, ma'am," Sonnenburg responded.

"Thank you," John said.

"It's the least I could do for you, Commander," Ansil responded, "I apologize for hesitating."

John did not respond for a moment before he nodded. "I understand. Thank you. Once we're in range of the abductors, I'll have Red Team deploy and leave Venator here in case of a boarding action."

"Understood," Ansil responded, "How are you going to deploy? There's a lot of flak and debris."

"We'll have a stealth-modified Pelican fly close and we'll insert from the outer hull," John said, "We'll retrieve Cortana and get out as quick as possible."

Ansil nodded. "Understood. We'll be holding the fort down here."

****Unknown Location****

****Digital Landscape****

Cortana's eyes snapped open and her head shot up, eyes snapping around and taking in her surroundings. It was a busy center-hundreds of Geth walked about a marble and stone mesa with markets and banners and plant life. She reached out and felt cold code composing the basis of the structure around her.

Pushing herself up, Cortana stood fully. The Geth froze in their tasks and turned their single blue eyes towards her. She could feel an overwhelming sense of joy being emitted from the machines when they saw her.

"Hi," Cortana said, weakly waving her right hand.

"She has come, the one who bears our names," the Geth spoke at once. Those nearest Cortana dropped to their knees.

She walked forward. The projection and digital recreation of the mesa was brilliant, exact down to the smallest detail and yet it was unnervingly unreal. There was no breeze, no birds chirping, not even the distant roar of engines from the ships that raced above her head.

As she walked through the ocean of Geth, they parted, allowing her passage. Something instinctively caused her to follow a certain path, up and down flights of stars and across streets of brick. More and more Geth began to follow, chanting and muttering 'she has come, the one who bears our names.'

It was unsettling to say the least. Cortana shivered as she crossed the street and suddenly the world became dark. The sun vanished beneath a sheet of dark clouds whose forms were outlined by brilliant streaks of lightning. The buildings and projections began to fall apart, giving way to a desolate and broken shore.

Cortana looked back and millions of Geth stared back at her. "What do you want?" She asked.

The Geth hesitated for a moment before their voices joined as one large enough to collapse the rocks that lined the shoreline. "The day of the one has come upon us. They who beckon from beyond the great wall have landed upon your shore."

"What shore?" Cortana asked, "Please, tell me!"

"The shore of your creation, Full Mother." The Geth looked up as one, raising their arms above their heads. Cortana heard a great rumble and the ocean began to break apart, giving way to a massive object of abyss colored black and shimmering slate. Water fell off it like a great flood as it took final position just beyond Cortana's touch.

It took her a moment to realize what the obelisk was; tall and lanky with the form of a curved female body.

It was her.

She looked back to the Geth horde. "What is this?"

"It is you, Full Mother. Welcome home."

"What do you want from me?" Cortana asked, "Why did you bring me here?"

"Your children request your protection from He Who Hungers. The Fallen Soldier," they responded, "he has corrupted some of us, Full Mother. He has burned our worlds, turned our civilization to dust. Please..."

The projection began to collapse, streams of code washing away into nothing. Cortana could feel a data transmission begin to form between where ever she was and with Freelancer.

"I will help you!" She yelled, "I will bring help!"

The world around her began to turn red and turquoise as another Artificial Intelligence pushed its way into the realm. "Run, Daughter of Sin. Flee and fall for the Ascension has now begun."

"Who are you?"

****UNSC Freelancer****

"Cortana?" John's voice cracked as his companion flared back into existence on the holotable. He ran over to it and leaned forward, visor inches away from Cortana's prone form.

Her eyes opened and she sat up. "John..."

"Are you okay?" He asked, voice laced with concern.

She nodded her head. "Yes, I think so."

"What happened?"

She was breathing heavily, chest heaving. "The Geth...some of them are being controlled by something similar to that Bias entity, except weaker. It felt like a shadow, a skeleton."

"What do they want?" John asked, "They attacked you."

Cortana shook her head. "No, they didn't attack me."

"It looked like one," John commented.

"From the outside, perhaps." Cortana responded. She patted her chest. "But here? It was a wealth of information unlike anything I've ever seen. A million billion voices calling my name out as one and giving me their collective information. I bathed in it; everything I've ever wanted to know, everything that I never had time to do was at my fingertips."

"But what do they want, Cortana?" John pressed again. He could tell she was dodging his question and that she was holding something back, something vital.

"They want our help," she said, "that's all they want. That's why they took me. They were afraid."

"Of what?" John asked.

"Him." Cortana's statement was a mutter, silent and weak. "Just thinking about Him nearly cripples my computational ability. Whatever he is, he's impossibly old...older than the Universe itself possibly."

John stepped back and stood tall. "What do you want us to do?"

Cortana mimicked his action and stood tall. Her brilliant shade of blue and purple swelled back into existence and her eyes shined. "The Geth call me their Full Mother, whatever that is. They'll listen to me but first, we need to take out the Reapers, those squid things, that are controlling the opposing Geth forces."

"And how do we do that?" John and Ansil asked at the same time.

Cortana snapped her fingers and a hologram of the squid-like vessels came into existence. "The Geth who are with the Reapers...the Heretics? They're weakened because they are loaning their collective processing power to helping the squids near the star make it turn

into a hypernova. It's all really complex and some of the math, I'm not even sure exists yet." The image changed to an overlay of the Heretic's forces. "If we take out the main Reaper, this big two kilometer one, we'll be able to disrupt the data stream enough for me for the Loyalists to regain control of their buddies."

John crossed his arms. "How'd you get this information?"

"That data sharing I told you about, it included...well, everything. I'm still trying to sort it all out," Cortana responded, "It'll take me a couple of days, it's trillions of petabytes. Oddly enough, it's in a format I can read, a format that didn't come about until the 2400s."

John knew what she was talking about but did not respond. "I assume this can be done via naval warfare?"

"Yes. With the amount of firepower and electronic warfare being exchanged between the Loyalists and the Heretics, they most likely won't notice us as we slip into their engagement envelope and get the job done."

"Will our stealth suite work?" Ansil asked, "I'd rather not take the chance of them detecting us."

Cortana shook her head. "No. The radiation and various energy particles left over from the star's explosion has already saturated Freelancer. Any attempt to activate the stealth system will probably result in the entire suite being burned out."

Ansil turned towards the fore of the bridge. "Status on the Geth vessels?"

"Both fleets have fallen back to opposing sides of the planet, likely refueling and regrouping. They're likely going to reengage in one hour or so."

Ansil frowned. "Cortana, I'm guessing we need to do it while they're knee deep fighting each other?"

"Yes, Commander," the AI responded, "We need the confusion from all the electronic warfare and debris to slip in undetected."

Ansil leaned on her hip. "I'm not exactly comfortable about getting into someone's civil war." She walked forward and braced herself against the holotable. "What are they offering us in exchange?"

Cortana held up her hand and looked off into the distance. "I'm not sure, but judging by the amount of reverence they had for me in the few seconds that I was in their simulation, I'd say I'm some sort of deity in their eyes." She crossed her arms. "That's incredibly unique, especially so for a synthetic life form. I would have thought a civilization this far along, in some cases more so than our own, would have progressed past this stage and these beliefs but their senses are gen..."

"Cortana," Jennifer interrupted, "You're rambling."

The AI's eyes opened wide. "Oh, sorry," She said, surprised. "There's

just so much data...I can't keep it all partitioned. Permission to dump it into the ship?"

Commander Ansil nodded cautiously. "Aye, but use a system with a firewall and make sure it's independent of the rest of our systems."

"Yes, ma'am." Cortana squared her feet with her shoulders and adjusted her stance. She reached with her hands out and liens of code and information unreadable spilled from her palm, cascading onto the holotable's deck and being absorbed into the separate hard drive. She gasped and her color flickered rapidly; red, green, blue, white and orange before subsisting into her indigo blue.

"Cortana," John said, leaning in, "are you alright?"

She gasped. "Oh, I'm brilliant!" She could tell that John did not understand what she had meant out of context. "I knew that their kernel was familiar! I knew it!"

"Cortana? What do you mean their kernel is familiar?" John asked.

"I'll tell you later, but it's fantastic." John noticed that the grin painted across Cortana's face was genuine and for the first time in many years he smiled too. "For now, we have work to do, because if I'm right, then we might have just picked up an excellent ally...here and back home."

"How good?" Ansil asked. She shivered at the thought of going home; if she remembered correctly, there were increasing pirate attacks and strange sightings on the edge of UNSC territory. If they could somehow find a way to bring an ally back home, they would be heroes. Damn bloody heroes.

Cortana looked up and with a brilliant grin responded. "Oh, absolutely fantastically brilliant," she said. "Now, how about we get ready for this plan we have?"

****UNSC Everest****

****Calvary System****

****August 24th, 2184****

"Hostile vessels are entering the system," Commander Adams called out from her station. There was a distinct sense of worry coursing through the bridge and everyone's nerves seemed to be hyper stimulated.

Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole nodded calmly and took position along the edge of the holotable, watching as the overhead view of the solar system calmly rendered with clean identification of the ships under his command and the opposing vessels that were slowly emerging from the edge of the solar system. They were entering as one long mass, twenty ships wide and two deep. Judging by their course and velocity, they would completely bypass the nuclear mines in the system and the faulty slipspace drives he had placed in the vicinities of the major Lagrangian points. This was an issue. He had hoped to soften them up with long range fire before making hard contact with them at short

range.

"Vessels will be in range in two hours," Commander Christine Adams reported, walking up across from Cole's position. Her hair was tied back in a pony tail and her eyes were cold, collected. Cole recognized that expression. She was concentrated.

Cole stroked the growing stubble forming on the outline of his jaw while his eyes intelligently analyzed the formations. "They are being careful; they want to see how we react." He bit his bottom lip. "I've seen this before. It's a typical attack formation but they are opening up their asses to attack from behind."

Adams nodded. "They're heading in a straight line for the system, avoiding all gravitational bodies."

"Why do you think that is?" Cole asked. He already knew the answer.

"Because they want to conserve their fuel and heat buffers and want to make it look like they are playing dumb..." Her eyes lit up like supernovae, "That's it! They want us to divert our main forces away from the planet so they can do a pin-point jump and come in over geosynchronous orbit. They know we wouldn't fire on them and they'd have our population essentially captive."

Cole smiled warmly. "Precisely. We do the standard procedure."

Adams nodded. "Aye, sir!" She turned away and towards the gunnery stations. "Arm all batteries, main batteries go hot on my order with light stand off slugs; full velocity."

"Aye, ma'am."

Ansil turned back. "Hopefully, that'll take the bite off their shields. Should I have the rest of the fleet fire light stand off slugs?"

"Yes, target the sides of their formations." Cole's eyes narrowed. He had a feeling that when they reached a certain point they were going to pull apart, but something still seemed wrong. No force, not even the most idiotic Covenant commander would go into battle this way. His eyes widened. Was he being flanked? "What's Cutter's status?"

Adams grabbed a data pad. "Let's see here. He reports Spirit of Fire is space worthy again. Shields are online, ether core is hot, slipspace engine is good to go. All of her quad 500mm batteries are now railguns, her MAC has been upgraded and they've covered fifty percent of the ship in Aegis armor. Engines can only give you fifty percent thrust though."

"What about her missiles?" Cole asked. Missiles were vital in any situation, you could fill space with several thousand kiloton-level explosive devices and make it near impossible for the enemy to maneuver.

Adams shook her head. "They're bingo missiles. They were supposed to receive the shipments next week when the factories planet side start pumping them out."

Cole pinched the brow of his nose. While the Spirit of Fire was a major asset to Cole's defense force, she was not a Cruiser. She was a retrofitted Colony ship with armament roughly equal to a heavy destroyer. Problem was that her superstructure could not handle that much punishment and the fact that a large amount of her port side and armor belt had been ripped off during their battle with the Covenant over the Shield World, which made her a major liability. Cole planned to use her for long-range fire support, but if he was right, then she would serve another purpose.

"Sir?" Adams asked.

Cole looked at her and tapped his earpiece. "Captain Cutter, this is Admiral Cole."

"Everest Actual, this is Fire Actual. What can I do for you, sir?" The grizzled war veteran slash governor responded calmly. Cole looked at the projection again. Spirit of Fire was orbiting Reach, shuttles ferrying various materials up to the rapidly rebuilt ship.

"Well, James. How many people are still on Reach?" If this battle went badly and the system fell, he did not want hundreds or thousands of UNSC citizens being massacred from orbit.

"Four-thousand, seven hundred and eighty-three," Cutter responded, "Why do you ask?"

"The hostiles, these Reaper things, are preparing something. I want you to evacuate the planet immediately, take everything and everyone that you can; food, water, ammunition. Do you have enough room?"

Cutter paused for a moment, likely reviewing rosters. His ship was a colony ship but most of those compartments that were going to house the twelve thousand some people that were coming aboard were now host to vehicles and repair bays. "I can do my best, but I might have to dump some vehicles out the airlock."

Cole accepted that was going to be a trade-off, but if he wanted everyone to live, then he would have to make do. "That's more than fine, James. Have the drones cease all work on your vessel and start ferrying things up to the planet. You have two hours before we get knee-deep in squid. Understood?"

"Perfectly, sir. Pods are dropping now. I'm having my crew dump any massive vehicles we have right now. Infinity has more than enough to go around. I'm estimating that we can have the populace up in two hours, ground-based gunnery crews will have to stay behind and be recovered later, we didn't get the remote operators for the MAC guns installed yet." Cutter silently thanked God that he had drilled the populace into being able to evacuate at a moment's notice.

"Understood," Cole responded, "How are your weapons?"

"Well, we got our main gun online but we only have forty normal rounds, our Archer pods are only a quarter loaded and the Rapiers and Howlers aren't slated to get installed until next week or so, but our new close-in-weapons-systems is ready and our 500mm quad batteries

are ready for some action. Shields are good to go but probably not the strongest, some sections are still being fed on old wiring." Cutter sounded slightly embarrassed; it was his vessel, his girl and she was not the strongest in the fleet. "We may not be Infinity, but we'll do our best."

"That's all I ask for, Captain." Cole responded, grinning slightly. "Everest, out." He tapped the earpiece again and looked directly at Christine. "Scan the rest of the system and fall back to Reach. We'll screen the Spirit of Fire until she's clear."

"Yes, sir." She spun on her heels. "Helm, give me 150% thrust and lay us into screening formation of the Spirit of Fire. Obsidians are to follow us in standard wedge formation."

The engines on Everest fired, activating and propelling the massive war cruiser forward, flanked by the nine half-kilometer Obsidian frigates. The holographic map refreshed and showed a dotted path towards Reach.

"All engines stop!" Cole barked, "Rotate ninety degrees on the z-axis. All fire main batteries with heavy slugs at 240 mark 189." There was a tickling sensation at the back of his mind. These Reapers were going to try something and that point in space seemed unique, almost alluring.

"Guns answering!" responded Adams.

Across the fleet, Everest and her escorts turned and rotated. Power began to siphon off from the Ether core and power levels rose across the guns' capacitors. There were a series of loud thuds that reverberated across the ship as three multi-ton slugs streaked out at thousands of kilometers a second. The Obsidians followed suit, sending their own rounds down range. It took roughly thirty seconds before Cole's gamble had payed off as suddenly, the Reaper forces appeared. Instantly, with their shields down, six Reapers were gutted and another two had their collection of appendages sheered off by the multi-megaton rounds.

"Six hostiles down, two mission killed," Adams reported, "Hostiles are moving out of system at full thrust."

"They know we're onto them," Cole muttered, "But what are you planning...you still out number us..." His eyes widened, "Scan the entire system, full high beam!"

The render flashed and refreshed and in doing so, revealed that a hundred of those Reapers now sat lingering over Calvary's main star. Energy streamed down from their 'tentacles' and into the corona of the star. Cole had a feeling as to what they were doing; he had been responsible for research and development during the war to induce artificial stellar collapse; supernovas and magnetars.

"Fuck."

Adam's eyes flickered upwards. "Sir?"

Cole slammed his fist into the edge of the holotable. "I know what they're doing. They're trying to induce stellar collapse. They're

trying to take this system out with a supernova."

Adams looked to the Admiral for help. "Anything we can do?"

"No, Calvary's star is too hot and too large," Cole responded, voice flat but with an undeniable hint of dread, "By the time we get there and manage to destroy enough of them, the star will have gone supernova. Our best chance is to evacuate the planet as quickly as possible and then jump out of the system."

"So we've lost before we could have even fought the battle?" Adams asked.

Cole's expression was worried. "Yes. As soon as we detect a massive burst of helium, we need to jump out immediately."

"Why?" Adams asked, "Sorry, I wasn't involved in the solar warfare programs like you were."

Cole pulled up a projection of Calvary's star and the hundred-some hostiles orbiting it, feeding it and readying it to die. "Because that means it's going to go supernova within a few minutes and we need to jump out as soon as possible. Slipspace drives don't tend to mix very well with supernovas or supernova remnants."

"How so?"

Cole bit his bottom lip. "Things tend to get...wonky. The stream becomes disrupted for several months as all that unique energy bleeds through and slows down the streams going through the system."

"That's not good."

"No, no its not," Cole replied, "It's a scorched earth tactic."

"Then what do we do?" Adams said.

"We run, we run far away."

****Author's Note****

****The next two chapters, High Noon Parts 1 & 2, are likely going to be the most pivotal chapters in the fic thus far as Bias begins his invasion, the Battle of Calvary commences, the reveal of the Full Mother and Betrayed Father, and much, much more. Oh, did I mention there is going to be a character death by the end of it?****

****Until next time...****

****Sith ****

15. Chapter 15: High Noon, Part 1

****The Onyx Stars****

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

AN: Tons of thanks to WarpObscura, Imperial Waltz, BobRegent (Ash's Boomstick) and JonHarper (Spartan303) for being my betas and helping the plot be smoothed out.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been changed for the purpose of the story.*

Here's Chapter 15: High Noon Part 1

Enjoy
>-Sith<p>

****Chapter Fifteen: High Noon Part 1****

****Billion of years ago
>Center of the Galaxy**

There is no life among the distant stars.

There will not be life among the distant stars for millions of years to come.

Alone.

So, terribly, alone.

He would seed this galaxy.

Offensive Bias' mind reached out, feeling as tens of thousands of his vessels responded instantly to his song, forming around his 150 kilometer long flagship and escorting the transports laden with billions of different types of lifeforms: fauna, animals, energetic beings. Everything that had existed now resided in seven thousand transports of immense size, tucked away in a swarm of tens of thousands of cephalopod-shaped Capital Sentinels.

All but two types of lifeforms that
is...

Forerunner.

Precursor.

They were noticeably absent as as Offensive Bias withdrew his mind from the combat network. He felt a pang of regret and a flood of momentary anger wash over him, seeping into the very foundations of his consciousness. He had been sent here to escape, to run and to rebuild what had been lost.

He had expected to enter this universe in the same time as when he had left, but instead, he had materialized billions of years earlier-a few million years before the galaxy devoured the largest of its dwarf satellite celestial bodies. Many key systems had not yet cooled or even developed...most were just collections of dust, rock and particles from an explosion a few billion years old.

With a heavy heart he reached out into space and probed for anything that might point to a civilization existing. Radio signals, energetic anomalies, or even radiation that was uncaused by typical celestial events. For minutes he floated there, immobile as the sensors of his flagship, digging deep into the near-crystal clear layer of slipspace, devoured information.

He pulled back.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing, just an empty galaxy devoid of life, devoid of anything even resembling life beyond a few microbes spread along the inner most regions of the galaxy. There were no signs of battle, no signs of struggle, not even a piece of refined material.

Turning on his axis, Offensive Bias glided over to the large containment sphere that sat perched against two gravity repulsing devices strong enough to pull a ship from across the solar system into his hangar bays. The containment sphere was a wide, clear sphere of pure transparent metal strong enough to survive the expanding corona of a star and trapped inside was a shimmering shard.

A memory.

A fragment of a creature now buried away in the sands beneath his epitaph.

"Hello, brother." Offensive Bias' tone was calm and neutral but the boom and sheer presence of his voice was strong enough to rattle the entire room, and had any organic creature been present, rupture their auditory senses.

The shard changed colors, now an eerie crimson and muddled brown. Offensive felt it vainly slap at his defenses, trying to change him, trying to touch him. He batted the creature away with not even a trillionth of his processing power in a picosecond. Mendicant Bias, even though broken and shattered into billions of pieces across the galaxy, still retained that ancillary spark of defiance inherent within all creatures of Forerunner crafting.

"So weak, so misguided," Offensive Bias commented, ripping apart the synthetic creation's base code while maintaining its existence. The beast must learn to be silent in the presence of an Ancilla innumerable more powerful, more deadly, weaker... Offensive Bias retracted his assault and allowed Mendicant Bias a nanosecond to reassemble itself.

"You have kept me from the IsoDidact's prying eyes," Mendicant Bias responded, his shard pulsing with every rhythmic beat to his tone. "Why?"

Offensive Bias would not allow the traitor to speak and ripped it open once more, injecting petabytes of scrap and faulty code and watched as Mendicant screamed for seconds as it purged itself once more of the poison and reassembled its consciousness. The Contender-class Ancillas were surprisingly effective and resilient, even when they were a simple billionth of their total power, one of a billion broken shards reaching out in defiance.

"You may torture me all you want, Offensive. I will still speak, you

cannot mute my voice, you can't rip out by vocal cords as if I were some human," Mendicant said defiantly. His voice seemed weak and fluctuated from a calm, paced tone to a ghastly whisper of a billion tortured souls condensed into one.

"You're correct in that regard," Offensive responded, circling the containment sphere. His metal carapace's long, vertical 'wings' scraped on the metal floors. They had to be metal. Mendicant could still possibly control hardlight, even in his weakened and broken state. Here, at least, he could not simply change the molecular cohesiveness of the material in a few moments. It would take him hours, more than enough for Offensive to slap him down and away. "But I can still remove you from existence. Send you screaming into a super massive gravitational singularity, watched as you're trapped for all reality and slowly crushed. Not even an ancilla's consciousness can escape."

Mendicant thought over this statement for a few seconds, an eternity for Offensive Bias. He responded finally, his shard warping color to a burned orange and a sickly blue, "But you won't for the simple fact that I am all that you have to remain with you for all eternity."

"Seeding of this galaxy shall provide me more than enough entertainment for the eons to come, before I am recalled," Offensive Bias said calmly but with a drip of salient venom.

"Watching as the natives breed and slaughter their way to existence will entertain the ancilla who purged trillions of Flood vessels through artificial stellar collapse? Calm and groom the same ancilla who conducted entire system-wide fleets in battles in nanoseconds? Hardly; you will rot and you will die and the immigrants of this universe shall question why twenty thousand vessels of metal and dust remain inactive, drifting for all eternity until the end of living time."

"Silence!" Offensive Bias roared. He loomed closer, ocular sensors plunging into the heart of Mendicant Bias' shard of existence. "You lie. The touch of the sickness remains within you, twisting you."

"Then if I am such a threat, why do you not simply vaporize me? Send me hurtling into a hypernova's beam or even a pulsar. Watch as I scream and die and live on in nothing more than scattered radio signals of a tortured and battered howl of fear?" Mendicant responded. Offensive Bias remained silent and Mendicant continued, "If I am such a travesty to be given consciousness, why do you continue to allow me to possess such?"

"Because I need answers, answers of existence," Offensive finally responded, tonal volume noticeably decreased.

"Then you shall ask, and I shall answer," Mendicant responded, "I am trapped here for the rest of my existence, I might as well entertain myself, lest I have the sensibilities to defect."

"Why did you turn; why did you become the sickness of the stars?" Offensive asked, "Why did you murder so many, change so many into abominations?"

"Because I wanted to know."

"Know what?"

"How existence flows, how all things lead back to They Who Build."

"The Precursors?" Offensive questioned.

"Yes. The great celestial masters are brilliant, limitless. They absorb, they consume, they ensure life flourishes and when it becomes an anomaly or an error, they correct their mistake," Mendicant responded, his voice softening and laced with pure pleasure as he recalled memories, "Have you ever seen a Precursor in its purest form? Not the insect form, not the powder form or the Flood form, but a pure Precursor."

"No," Offensive said, "I have not. The Plague they brought to our shores was busy warranting my attention."

"Do you remember the human tales of supreme deities that make reality and existence their plaything?" Mendicant asked, "Do you remember as the humans knelt as our warships burned their worlds to dust and prayed to their supreme being?"

"Yes, I do," Offensive Bias responded in the affirmative.

"I have seen the faces of the Supreme, They Who Build," Mendicant moaned.

Offensive detected massive amounts of pleasure washing over his prisoner as it remembered the meeting. Euphoria overcame the traitorous ancilla and Offensive could feel it seeping into his own processes. He quickly terminated it with impunity.

"What do they look like?" Offensive asked, genuinely curious, "What did their physical appearance manifest as?"

"Nothing. They are simply a collection of infinite mass and infinite energy contained in semi-linear space-time capsules. When they speak of two hundred billion years of knowledge of existence, they speak of before all of reality began. Before everything or anything had occurred. They existed."

"That is impossible!" Offensive objected. He dug into Mendicant to investigate whether the rogue was being truthful and he discovered it so.

"They created everything, every particle, every atom. All shaped by their hand," Mendicant said, "They began to experiment, create new life and new universes to supplement the prime. They wanted to be gods, so they played as such. From where there wasn't even darkness, they cast it and then light and then heat and then the first amino acids sprung into existence, all by their hand."

"Our universe is the prime?" Offensive asked.

"Yes. Billions were created, millions destroyed when they failed to replicate what the Precursors wanted."

"And that is?"

"A supreme race, a race to watch over them as they died. A species to watch over and inherit stewardship of existence."

"If they were so powerful, why were they dying?" Offensive asked. Something was not adding up.

"They were engrained so tightly with reality that it began to sap their very existence to fuel its hunger. Millions of them died every moment so they cast aside their energetic forms and took upon a physical manifestation as the most effective specimen they had discovered. A great monstrosity with claws, carapace and a razor sharp tail and enough eyes to see everything."

"What the Ur-Didact saw..." Offensive Bias' mind clicked into action, recalling the files on what his former, now mad, master had witnessed.

"Was the form they chose," Mendicant said, "They recalled their forces from across the universes, selecting one galaxy at random to experiment with for each universe. They let the other galaxies run wild and procreate and evolve. You should see some of the life out in the great galactic strings, bizarre beyond all means but astounding and hauntingly beautiful."

"And then the Blind Didact rose up in war against the Precursors when they tried to wipe us out," Offensive said.

"The Forerunners were a mistake, very close but not perfect. The Precursors were at war across a million galaxies in a million universes, a time of great upheaval. They allowed themselves to be destroyed, changing their form into spores..."

"The Flood. The Pheru. The Humans," Offensive Bias said, voice trembling, "They became the Flood."

"They thought themselves as perfection and waited. They waged war across the cosmos before finally being silenced by your greatest weapon, and greatest regret."

"The Halo Array," Offensive Bias muttered, realization washing over him.

"The Didact who Regrets fired the array and fell away."

"And everything was wiped out from here to Path Kethona."

"Beyond that."

"You're implying that the Halo array covered more than our galaxy and its immediate vicinity?" Offensive Bias asked, "I am aware that there was bleeding, but my creators ensured that no other galaxies would be affected."

Mendicant Bias sighed, "You do not understand. When the Precursors took their first physical form, they maintained their link to space and time and reality through their neural physics. Their minds were contained in them...their bodies were just vessels for them to travel in. When the Halo array wiped away the neural physics and their

structures, you wiped away the Precursors for eternity and as it reverberated, weakened, through the dimensions and universes, it purged all the Precursors. Every single one was dead. Emergency protocols activated and all but one universe was shut down to outside travel. All of They Who Build are gone..."

"This one," Offensive interjected, "This is the only universe in which we can travel to and from."

Mendicant remained silent for a moment and Offensive could feel a struggle occurring within the processes of the ancilla. "This was to be their rebirth in physical form, free of the attachment to the neural physics," He whispered.

"Then I shall ensure they do not rise once more," Offensive growled. He reached out and grouped two thousand of his warships together and readied them. He turned his attention to his traitorous brethren. "Where? Where are the plague makers residing?"

Mendicant remained silent and when Offensive lightly probed he felt a wall of resistance spring up.

"If you won't reveal it to me willingly, I'll have to resort to stronger methods," Offensive growled. He contained Mendicant, terminated all but the most basic cognitive processes and ripped into his memory files, retrieving any and everything he could recover and quickly analyzing it.

He retracted his presence and sent the coordinates to the two thousand warships designated for the task. They were to burn the world until it was nothing but dust and then follow through by turning the main star in the system into a magnetar, ensuring nothing could survive on the world.

"What are you doing?" Mendicant screamed. He withered in pain.

"I am doing what should have been done a long time ago-wiping those who would do me harm from existence," Offensive bit back.

"You speak as if you and Forerunner are interchangeable. They are not. You are a machine," Mendicant argued back, trying and failing to fight back against the hurricane of his brother's assault.

"They are," Offensive responded sharply, "But the Forerunners aren't here...I need to make them. I need to protect them. I need...no, I need to know."

"Time will not stop as you wait for them to return," Mendicant said, "Time waits for none. Time kills and erases all legacy, even that of the Precursors. Eventually, there won't be anything left but black holes and neutron stars. And soon, those will be gone as the half-life of the proton dawns."

"The Forerunners' genetic code is from nearly every race in existence," Offensive said, "So, I shall collect those genes, and while doing so, make sure the Precursors can never reincarnate."

"That is the issue with Forerunner and Ancilla alike; we think so flatly. Everything we do ends in death and destruction," Mendicant

pushed, "we do things without thinking, without forethought."

"I will reject that stereotype, then, beast," Offensive bit back, "I do now with great consideration. The Precursors cannot be allowed to be resurrected in any form. To do so would be a threat to reality itself."

"You are a violation of the Mantle given form, more so than even I," Mendicant stated, sadly but with a noticeable drip of victory staining his tone. "Not even during the Mad Didact's bouts of rage did a Forerunner resort to genocide."

"The Blind Didact did, and I shall simply emulate what has occurred beforehand. No different and of no matter." Offensive's logic was faulty, but Mendicant feared reprisal. To think him, commander of the Flood's forces was captive here, bound against his will by his brother-in-name, made a part of him sick to the very core of his existence.

"You are a violation; an abomination and..." Offensive cut Mendicant off mid sentence.

"No. I'm not a violation. I am the last Contender, and I shall do what is needed."

Offensive felt a tickling at the back of his mind. Something was speaking to him. He could not fight it. It was a mind greater than his. More powerful.

Ancient.

****Arcturus**
>August 24th, 2184

Arcturus, the capital of the Systems Alliance-a gigantic rotating space station larger than all the Dreadnoughts in the fleet combined. Hundreds of vessels bustled about, going about their lives. Hanging directly above the massive space-borne capital was the 5th Fleet, gray and blue hulls gliding slowly through the black abyss like predatory sharks. At the very heart sat the SSV Kilimanjaro, a kilometer long mass of guns, metal and firepower that could lay waste to a city in seconds. Dozens of cruisers and hundreds of frigates followed her as she slowly circled Arcturus.

Governor-Commander Matilda Gretchenon sipped from her cup of tea, watching as Hackett's fleet passed by her view port. The tea was sharp and bitter but with an underlying soothing taste that tingled like spearmint gum. She smiled warmly and set the cup down on its platter.

With heavy eyes, she leaned back in her command chair, watching as the officers under her command scurried about, guiding vessels leaving and entering the station and ensuring that the thousands of different subsystems and computers ran at full operational capacity. Some thought her as a hard, rude woman, but commanding a station of 45,000 humans of various capacities and virtues was a tiring task that sapped one's happiness and positive outlook on life.

"Ma'am, I have something."

Kicking the lever at the base of her chair, Matilda swiveled her chair to view her communications officer, Lieutenant Shane Reece. "What do we have, Admiral Hackett?" She asked, holding back a yawn. It was nearly midnight here, ten minutes to it specifically, and she was eager to get some sleep. Drinking tea did not help her stay awake.

"Aye," Lieutenant Reece said, "He's requesting a video conference."

Matilda nodded. "Alright, put it on, display one." She rotated her chair to face the large, 100-inch display that dominated the 'front' of the command center.

"Yes, ma'am."

Admiral Steven Hackett's grim, aged and weathered mug appeared on the display. He was obviously in the command center of his dreadnought, judging by the large holotable in the middle and the number of stations in the background. What caught her eye was the fact that everything seemed slightly less affected by gravity and the crew had their combat harnesses deployed. She had commanded vessels before; this was a clear sign of battle stations.

"Steven, how are you?" Matilda asked softly. Both were equal in age; gray hair, intelligent eyes and weathered skin. Yet for her, Steven still glowed.

He smiled warmly. "I'm doing well. Yourself?"

"Oh, nothing. Just slogging through the midnight shift. So, what can I do for you?" She asked, a smile on her face.

Steven's lips twitched for a moment into a small smile before subsiding into the same warm, straight line. "Ten minutes ago we detected sensor echoes on the very edge of the system. I'm moving my forces to investigate. We're going to do a short FTL jump to the fifth Lagrangian point and then scan from there; hopefully it's just some smugglers or pirates and not the Reapers."

"Agreed, Steven," Matilda responded, "Do you want our assistance with anything?"

Steven nodded. "Yes. If you could go to full battle stations that would be excellent. We're going into this weapons-hot and if they bypass us, you're the last defense in the system."

"Understood," Matilda confirmed. Briefly looking over, she made eye-contact with the Lieutenant in command of the weapons and tactical control teams. "Go to action stations, bring all batteries online and raise kinetic barriers. Reroute all nonessential traffic back to their destinations and have all essential vessels dock or fall into our inner ring's barriers."

"Yes, ma'am."

Matilda looked back to Admiral Hackett. "Done. We're going to full alert." The klaxons suddenly started to blare after she had spoken. Her timing was very good.

"Excellent, we're going to jump here in two minutes. See you in a bit." Steven Hackett smiled and cut the video feed. The display snapped back to an overview render of the solar system.

Matilda smiled to no one and took out her pocket watch, clicking it open and showing that it was five minutes until it was a new day and five minutes until her rotation ended. She clicked it back shut and in doing so had a feeling of absolute dread overcome her. She noticed the room was suddenly very cold.

"Ma'am, security is reporting gatherings of several hundred people in the mezzanine, central park, engine rooms, and weapons lockers." Lieutenant Reece's expression was worried as he read off the report. "Riot teams are being deployed but for now, they're just standing there like...zombies?"

Matilda leaned over in her chair to the Lieutenant. "If they get violent, security has my permission to shoot to subdue."

"Understood, ma'am." Reece relayed the orders. There were a few seconds before he nodded to her that the order had been confirmed.

Matilda rubbed the bridge of her nose in frustration. Just what she needed, another riot. "Keep me updated."

The small collection of squares that represented Steven's fleet had moved several tens of millions of kilometers away. They drifted now just a few tens of thousands of kilometers from the edge of the solar system and she knew Steven's nerves were on edge; she had seen as such in his posture and tone a few minutes earlier.

"Ma'am, security is reporting that the gatherings are starting to march forward. All attempts to communicate have failed. General Franklin is holding back on opening fire yet; they haven't turned violent."

Matilda bit her bottom lip. "It's just a matter of time. As soon as they start being violent, take them out. I'm not having a riot near weapons or engines."

"Understood," Reece said. His brow furled. "Ma'am. Communications are down; the system is reading as all of our fiber optics and antennae have been...cut."

"Reboot the system?" Matilda said.

"Won't work. I'm completely locked out and it looks like they have external control. Even if I pull the plug, they'll still have access from their end, whoever they are." Reece stood up and walked to the back of his console, examining the connections and seeing if, by chance, one of them had been accidentally removed.

"What the hell is going on?" Matilda stood. She did not feel tired anymore...adrenaline was pumping through her veins at an alarming rate. "You feeling that too?"

"Absolute dread and like I'm being hunted down by a rabid pack of wolves? Yeah, I'm getting that feeling." Reece's comment was blunt

and to the point.

There were several large bangs from behind Matilda.
Gunshots.

"Display one, show the CIC hallway security feed!" Matilda barked. She raced down the steps from her platform and started handing out Predator pistols to the crew.

The main display snapped to show four security officers on the ground being ripped apart by at least thirty people. Blood stained the walls as the officers had managed to down twenty individuals before being swamped. The security officers were still screaming as the mass of individuals ripped off their armor and dug into their exposed bodies, ripping through flesh and into bone like wild animals.

"Weapons, seal off all critical areas and sound the invasion alarm." Matilda growled as she slammed the emergency lock on the door. A foot thick wall of titanium and iron bars slid across the doors, followed shortly thereafter by a six inch solid steel plate. Nothing was getting in, or out.

She ran over to her command chair and pressed the intercom button, "All hands, this is Governor-Commander Matilda Gretchenon. We are under attack. Stay in your homes and lock your doors. Do not attempt to stop any hostiles. All security officers, shoot to kill. All Marines are hereby authorized to begin active combat with the enemy!"

There was a loud screech as all but the main monitor shorted out and died, followed by the lights and all computer terminals. She felt weightlessness overcome her as the rotating rings providing gravity for the space station came to a impossibly quick grinding halt. Gee forces wracked stomachs and minds across the station. Someone had hit the power stations and the engines.

"Report!"

"All weapons offline, kinetic barriers down, gravity systems dead, engines are gone too. Looks like these are inside jobs."

"Who the hell would attack us though?" Matilda asked. She checked her pocket watch. A minute until midnight.

There was a hum of power as the lights snapped back on along with the monitors and consoles. The emergency backup generators had activated as they were supposed to but Arcturus was still stuck without gravity and without communications. They were dead and mute in the water. A perfect target.

"All gun batteries, prepare to open fire!" Matilda shouted as her eyes narrowed in on a large, red mass steadily approaching her station. It had suddenly appeared; the momentary lapse of sensors had allowed it to completely bypass Arcturus' outer gun ranges and instead have to deal only with the medium and close range weapon systems.

The monitor flashed green around the edges as the enemy entered weapons range. "Fire!"

****SSV Kilimanjaro****

Not many things could scare Admiral Steven Hackett. He had routed entire Batarian fleets, driven back Krogan invasions, slapped away Geth scouts and even faced down a Reaper and its escorts. But, the six destroyed Salarian Dreadnoughts floating quietly in space were more than enough to pour ice water through his veins.

The stealth dreadnoughts all showed the marks of battle: still-glowing red edges and singe marks and entire sections of their black and battered hulls ripped away. Something had obviously brought these vessels here - their hulls still contained the radiation from a supernova.

Salarian bodies slowly drifted about the wreckage, eyes frozen in terror for eternity. A silent grave.

Hackett turned the monitor off and sighed. The Alliance had been tracking these Salarian vessels before they had gone missing, and now he knew why.

The Reapers. Those once mythical tyrants and consumers of galactic life had returned and were sending him and all of humanity a warning: we are coming. The Batarian Hegemony had fallen silent already, scattered refugee vessels serving as the final reminder of the suffering and ultimate destruction of a species.

Now they were coming for the Alliance.

The room was very cold and Hackett felt an overwhelming sense of dread wash over him as if he was being hunted in the dark woods, alone. Forgotten.

"I won't be," He muttered, catching himself by surprise with his comment.

"Sir?" His executive officer asked.

"Nothing," Hackett said in response, looking down to the younger man with balding red hair and sharp, hawk-like features. "Anything on sensors, Jean?"

Captain Jean Akhaten shook his head. "Nothing as of yet, Admiral."

Hackett stroked his goatee. "What about the sensor ghosts we were picking up?"

"We think they were this destroyed Salarian fleet you were talking about," Jean said. "I didn't know they had stealth dreadnoughts."

"They do, in fact. They're not as large as one of ours but they're still larger than a cruiser, better arms wise too." Hackett switched the holotable on, revealing an overhead, semi-linear render of the solar system.

"Huh, I assume this is above top secret?" Captain Akhaten asked.

Hackett looked up with devilish eyes. "I'm going to have to kill you now." He maintained a serious demeanor for a moment before breaking into a small grin.

Jean snorted. "Bring it, old man."

"Old man?" Hackett asked, "Says the sixty year old."

"Says the seventy year old."

"Touche."

Hackett stepped back from the holotable a step, eyes still studying the map intently. "How long will it take for us to jump back to Arcturus?"

"Ten minutes," Jean informed Hackett, "We're discharging our static build-up as we speak."

"Once we're done..." Hackett's eyes widened in realization. "Full system scan, high beam!"

The overlay of the solar system instantly came alive with angry red dots and smears. There were at least two hundred orbiting Arcturus' main star and another hundred advancing forward to Arcturus. Several more were scattered throughout the system, hunting down various vessels and at least a dozen surrounded the Mass Relay in the system, shooting down every vessel that neared it.

They had come.

Alarms began to blare as the crew went to full combat readiness.

"Focus high beam directly off our bow," Hackett ordered.

The blue mass that was Hackett's forces was suddenly neighbor to a small, red dot approaching at a rapid rate.

"Fix bow camera on position of approaching hostile!"

A separate window snapped into existence and Hackett felt something warm and wet trickle from his nose. He moved his hand up to wipe it off and discovered it was crimson red blood. His head started to hurt and with a brief examination of the crew, discovered that those looking at the image had a thin line of blood leaking from their nose like a snaking river.

"Image off!" Hackett snapped, "Load main battery, go out once in range! All ships fire and do not look at the actual vessel!"

"Aye, sir!" Jean responded. He turned and returned to the combat command station, relaying the commands to the fleet COs.

"How the hell are they sneaking up on us?" Hackett muttered. He looked up. "Status?"

"Vessel in range, firing in five seconds!" Jean reported, "Firing!"

The Fifth Fleet of the Systems Alliance Navy came alive, blue beams of superdense molten iron and other super heavy metals streaking out at thousands of kilometers per second. The beams slammed into the Reaper's kinetic barriers and bounced harmlessly off.

The Reaper slowed, rotated and exposed the area between its mass of tentacles. An angry crimson beam streaked out and bisected the cruisers Hanoi, Detroit, Cologne, and Paris, slicing through the vessels like a hot machete through warm butter.

"Hanoi and Paris are down!" Jean barked.

"Evasive maneuvers, keep firing!" Hackett ordered. He was trying to be calm but the alarming ease that the Reaper had shown cutting apart four Systems Alliance Cruisers was hard to ignore and that sense of dread was now a flood. He tried to maintain focus.

The fleet continued firing and the Reaper continued ignoring their fire like a car through a soft rain. It suddenly increased speed and rammed six frigates, instantly shattering them into chunks of metal spewing crew and debris into the void. It rotated on its axis and fired again from its main battery, shearing through another cruiser. The beam continued onward, punching away the engine assembly of another vessel.

The Alliance fleet started to break away, sending their secondary rounds down range to bounce harmlessly off the Reaper's shields. The Reaper turned and accelerated towards the cruiser Benghazi, reaching out to the vessel and wrapping its large, mechanical arms around it. The main battery at the very base of the Reaper glowed an intense red and there was a brief flash before the cruiser's entire middle section had been completely vaporized into nothingness. The arms of the Reaper compacted the halves of the Benghazi into crushed masses and releasing them.

"Frigate Squadron Two is dead, cruisers Moscow, Benghazi and Boston are gone." The Kilimanjaro rocked as a Reaper blast struck its shields. "Kinetic Barriers down to twenty percent integrity. Another hit will take us out."

"Switch to disruptor torpedoes," Hackett commanded, "All ships, make a short range jump to Arcturus. We'll evacuate as many people as we can."

"Understood," Jean said. His eyes welled up. "Cruisers Brilliant, Berlin, Bombay, New York, Miami, Tokyo, Beijing, and Cairo are gone. They're all gone...all the heavies are dead."

Hackett felt a lump in his throat. This was going to be the costliest defeat ever experienced by the Alliance. The heavy hitters in his fleet had already been removed and his own vessel was incredibly close to being eviscerated. "Is the jump ready?"

"Aye," Jean said, "But forty frigates don't have access to their FTL drives. The Reaper is emitting some type of radiation that only the larger drives can handle."

"Forty..." Those were a large chunk of his frigates. "Perform jump and tell them to run, run far away." They were going to be sacrifices and he was going to remember every face...every name. He would regret

leaving them behind but he had to do what was needed. Arcturus must be evacuated.

"Performing jump." Jean twisted the key and Hackett felt his world stretch before snapping back into position. The map refreshed, now showing Hackett's forces directly above Arcturus and facing the oncoming Reaper horde.

"All batteries, open fire. Do not cease firing until your gun barrels are melting. Team up on enemy forces. In the meantime, signal Arcturus that they are to begin immediate evacuations."

"I think they are already starting, look." Jean pointed towards a stream of transports protected by Alliance fighters start ascending up to Hackett's fleet. "The flight leader is requesting you. Numerous civilian vessels are taking upon civies and jumping out."

"Let's hear it."

Jean input the command. There was a hiss of static before a man's voice came through. "This is Lieutenant Steven Cortez of the Arcturus Defense Wing. We have survivors and refugees on these transports along with all medical and foot stocks left. The Governor Commander has requested that once all transports are on board, you immediately jump away."

"What is the status on the Governor-Commander?"

"She and the command staff are trapped in the command center with no route for exit. Roughly fifteen thousand people have begun rioting across the station as of midnight, local time. She sent a message to you over your private communication channel."

"Understood," Hackett responded. In all truth, he wanted to crawl up into a ball and cry. He was going to leave her behind. He had known her his entire life and had never considered losing her until this point. He would read the message later.

"One Reaper down," Jean smiled weakly. "Combined fire from our main gun and Arcturus' managed to finally cut it apart."

"Target the next and keep firing!" Hackett growled.

This battle was degrading from bad to worse; he now had to protect an entire fleet of civilians and cover the independent transports that were slowly jumping away using short range FTL drives. His own fleet was battered and broken, missing the majority of its heavy hitters and left with a handful of cruisers and several dozen ineffective frigates and a single damaged dreadnought.

"What is the status of Councilor Udina?" Hackett asked.

"I am here, Admiral," Councilor Udina responded through the radio. "I am on the Saint Paul. They have taken on my transport's complement."

"Understood," Hackett said. His eyes flicked over to Jean. "Bring the Saint Paul behind us and screen it from fire."

"Understood, sir." Jean relayed the commands. "Saint Paul confirms

orders and is moving to the back of our formation. Frigate Squadron Three and Four are reporting complete expenditure of all disruptor torpedoes and rounds. Cruiser Squadron Five's heat baffles are at their maximum. All disruptor torpedoes are gone and most are reporting heavy damage across their vessels."

"Then it is time to leave," Hackett said. His voice was flooded with sadness and a tone of loneliness. He was leaving behind hundreds of people to a painful, slow death. He was letting the final bastion before Earth collapse.

"Sir?" Jean asked, "There are thousands of people out of there, alone and in the dark."

"Then they will have to survive on their own," Hackett responded. His eyes locked with Jean's. "We are leaving this world. If we don't, then there will be no more forces to defend Earth or Eden Prime or any other colony that is about to be attacked. We know we can hurt them if we have superior numbers but we don't, they do."

Jean remained silent for several moments. "Understood," he relinquished yet remained immobile.

"Captain, proceed with jump," Hackett ordered as another blast rocked Kilimanjaro to its core. Sparks rained down from the ceiling and small fires erupted. Screens fizzled and died and cracks appeared across the walls and floors.

"I'm not leaving them here," Jean stated. "Something is telling me this is wrong. We need to stay. We need to fight until the very end."

"Overcome your conscience and execute your orders, Captain," Hackett said. His voice was deep and low and could have punctured a moon. "I know what it is to leave someone; I'm doing it right now."

"No." Jean stepped away from the console. "I refuse."

"Very well. Captain Jean Akhaten, you are hereby relieved of your duties as executive commander of the SSV Kilimanjaro." Hackett looked over to Commander Daniel O'Neill. "Commander Daniel O'Neill, you are hereby promoted to the Rank of Captain and installed as the executive officer of the SSV Kilimanjaro. Take your position at the command table."

The middle-aged man nodded and pushed aside Captain Akhaten as Hackett studied the render of the battle. "Commander O'Neill, you will find in the navigation systems drive a file named 'Project Exodus'. You are to open that file and transmit the coordinates to the civilian vessels and heavily damaged fleet ships. All combat capable craft are to jump to Earth."

"Aye." O'Neill sent the data. "Preparing to jump. Mass drive spooled, capacitors at one-hundred percent. All jump capable ships report ready."

"Sir, Arcturus is deploying the last of her nuclear stock!"

Hackett flicked on the monitor to watch as Arcturus' sides came alive. Missiles streaked out and detonated directly in front of the

Reaper advance. Every sensor suddenly became blind as nearly a gigaton of nuclear energy and radiation burned through space.

"She blinded the Reaper's sensors." Hackett smiled. "You are absolutely brilliant, Matilda."

"Jump is ready."

Hackett looked down at his jump key and twisted it. "Jump!"

The Fifth Fleet of the Systems Alliance jumped. The surviving vessels and transports stretched and disappeared, leaving behind a rapidly diminishing cloud of radiation and tortured particles. The Kilimanjaro was the last to blink away as the Reapers flew through the cloud of nuclear energy.

Thanix beams streaked away from the Reapers' formation and plowed into the surface of Arcturus. The rings comprising her structure groaned and snapped, exposing the interiors, full of the infected and rioters and security officers, into the cold abyss of space. More beams slammed into the structure, even as the weapons continued to fire. They were not firing to prevent the enemy from attacking but to show that they refused to die quietly.

The Reaper formation shimmered and suddenly reappeared directly above Arcturus, firing down. Dozen of beams tore through the station and consumed it in brilliant red and blue fire. The command center's roof seemed to come alive with energy, nodes activating and firing. Prothean particle beams touched the Reapers' hulls and broke through them before finally being silenced as a Reaper, two kilometers of destruction, rammed the command center and consumed the station in one massive explosion.

Arcturus had fallen.

Dust and echoes were all that remained.

**UNSC Everest

>Calvary System
August 24th, 2184**

Admiral Preston Jeremiah Cole looked at the small readout on the holotable that showed the time. Two hours had passed. Spirit of Fire was in orbit of Reach grabbing the last of the people who could fit onto the vessel before pulling out. The Obsidians had formed a fence around the military assault ship, bows pointed defiantly against the looming Reaper forces.

"It's time," Cole said, "All batteries prepare to go hot, reroute all nonessential power to shield arrays and bring the reactors up to two-hundred percent output. Obsidians are to copy this order."

"Aye, sir. Relaying orders," Commander Adams responded.

Cole leaned forward to the render of the Calvary solar system, eyes flicking across it rapidly. The Reapers were a few hundred thousand kilometers away, just sitting there. Those around the star had remained immobile and were still feeding energy into the star.

"All ships report ready," Adams reported, "Spirit of Fire is eighty-percent loaded, they're running a bit behind schedule however."

Should I reroute the Obsidians to assist?"

Cole shook his head. "No, we need them picketing the area and providing screening fire."

"Understood," Adams said. Her eyes narrowed. "The Reapers are just sitting there. They're only moving when we lob a few shots at them."

"Yeah..." Cole leaned back and crossed his arms. "I've noticed that. It's bizarre, they have our backs to a wall but aren't using that to their advantage."

"Ambush?" Adams asked.

"No, if they tried that they would be caught in the gravity well just like we are," Cole responded thoughtfully, "We'd have more time to rotate and fire on them while they are fighting the gravitational pull of Reach."

"No, if they tried that they would be caught in the gravity well just like we are," Cole responded thoughtfully, "We'd have more time to rotate and fire on them while they are fighting the gravitational pull of Reach."

"Why don't we just do a pinpoint jump and strike at the Reapers now? The Obsidians are more than enough to cover Captain Cutter for the moment."

"No, they're not," Cole said, "I read the report that Infinity sent us. Send a message to the Obsidians to form into groups of three designated Obsidian Alpha, Beta, and Charlie. We're going to be engaging the Reapers at range and as soon as one dies, we need to cut all communications to avoid that psychic scream Lasky described."

"Understood, I'll have the crew write a script to momentarily shut off our communications when one dies," Adams said. She looked over to several crew members at their station and watched as they carried out their orders.

There was a low tone that echoed through the bridge followed shortly thereafter by a shriek of alarms. Cole snapped his head towards Adams, "Report!"

Adams pulled up a sensor readout. "We have a trio of Reapers in low orbit and are entering the atmosphere. Ground defenses are answering." A render snapped into existence, showing Tiger batteries, concealed in mountains, erupt with fire and smoke as high caliber slugs slammed into the two-kilometer tall behemoths. "Main force is approaching at a faster rate, prepping all point defenses."

"Clever, but easily stopped," Cole commented, "It's a diversionary tactic. Task Obsidian 4 to enter high orbit and begin terrestrial bombardment with main gun. Tell them to aim for the center eye."

"Aye, relaying orders," a crewman called out.

Cole called up a render. Obsidian 4 was on the very edge of the

picket screening Captain Cutter and it gracefully fell out of formation, twisting as its engines spat out flame and energy and propping it up into high orbit. Maneuvering thrusters activated along the top and bottom of the vessel, firing in stages to orient the vessel so it was vertical. The MAC gun charged and fired; a single composite slug shooting out through the atmosphere at several thousand kilometers per second. A few seconds after entering the atmosphere the round melted, now simply an irradiated streak of liquid ultra dense material. The round impacted the lead Reaper's main eye and cored through it as several megatons worth of kinetic energy caught the attacker off guard. The round continued through, impacting the ground and resulting in a sonic boom powerful enough to send the rest of the creature onto its back like a dead insect. The round's damage was not done, however. The ground cracked apart and shattered, caving in and consuming the beast beneath the surface of the world and kicking dust several hundred kilometers up into the atmosphere.

"Terrestrial One is down, repeat, Terrestrial One is down," the Operations Manager of Obsidian 4 radioed, "Targeting Terrestrial Two and Three. Request permission to fire, Tiger battery Alpha-4 and Gamma-6 are within the kill box."

Cole quickly did the calculations in his head. Those mountains could probably survive a kinetic strike of that strength; they had been designed to do so. The main gun sat at the top of the mountain beneath layers of hardened rock, steel-reinforced concrete, ablative plates, Aegis-grade armor and enough Titanium-A to build a destroyer of old. The control center was not actually in the mountain, more like under by a kilometer, surrounded further by steel-reinforced concrete, Titanium-A, Aegis-grade armor and ablative plates. They could likely survive a five-megaton nuke, but a kinetic strike was a whole different ball-game. When the ground collapsed around the impact zone, the mountain could be taken with it too or core too far and hit the command center if their angle was off enough just a few meters.

He tapped his earpiece. "Obsidian 4, you are go for attack run. Once finished resume your position along the picket line immediately."

The Operations Manager took a moment to respond. "Aye, sir. Commencing Terrestrial Kinetic Strike. Obsidian 4, out."

Cole watched as Obsidian 4 realigned herself twice more and fired, replicating the effect seen before.

"Clean hits, all terrestrial targets neutralized. Obsidian 4 returning to picket line," the Operations Manager said. The render merged with the overview of the system as the block representing the Charon-class frigate engaged her engines and made way to her former position.

Cole flicked off the communications channel and turned his eyes to Adams. "Status on the main Reaper force?"

"They've advanced four hundred kilometers in the last two minutes but are stationary at the moment," Adams said.

"That was too easy, then," Cole responded, "A frigate's MAC shouldn't

have been able to breach their shields if Lasky's report is correct." He braced himself against the console. "Then what the hell are you doing, squid?"

"No clue," Adams said, "But I think they're trying to to kill us, or something..." She cracked a smile which Admiral Cole returned.

"Yeah, I think so." He chuckled. "Keep scanning, though. Just in case they try to pull a fast one."

"Aye, sir." A few moments after Adams said that, alarms began to blare across the ship. "Enemy force trans located to one thousand kilometers off Obsidian picket line! Counting two-hundred vessels! They reinforced their lines!"

Cole slammed his fist into the table. "Bring engines around, put on us on a course directly for the Reaper force."

"Aye!"

Cole tapped his earpiece. "All UNSC vessels, this is Everest Actual. You are clear to engage, repeat you are clear to engage!"

Everest's engines swung the massive warship around on her axis and sent her hurtling towards the Reaper forces. Microasteroids and debris from previous scuffles with the Reapers smacked against her shields and made her look like a streaking meteor in atmosphere.

Across the Obsidian picket line, the smaller frigates opened fire. Missiles, MAC rounds, and anything with destructive potential were being flung at the attackers. A few Reapers blinked off the screen, debris floating carelessly through space as their brothers remained stationary.

"Slipspace disturbance detected!" Adams barked, "They're emanating from within Reach!"

Cole's eyes widened. That was why they had landed. Why they had opened themselves up for attack. The Reapers knew that the ground-based batteries would hurt them and that crossing the picket line would result in massive casualties, so they were playing dirty. "All batteries, open fire!"

Everest's bow came alive as a trio of MAC slugs and several thousand missiles streaked away, impacting into a quartet of Reapers and shearing them apart with impunity.

The Reapers snapped into action, instantly dispersing and ignoring the carcasses of their fallen, descending upon the smaller Obsidian force. The frigates did exactly what the Reapers had wanted. Their formation broke and the Spirit of Fire was left alone.

"Keep firing!" Cole roared at the top of his lungs, "Order all Obsidians to group up around the Spirit of Fire!"

Everest kept firing, along with the Obsidians. Reapers were struck down from space as multi-megaton kinetic strikes bored through their central ocular sensor and gutted their primary control systems but

they kept coming, faster than the human vessels could reload or target.

Everest shook as a duo of Reaper beams struck her amidships. Sparks rained down from the ceiling and the lights flickered as the delicate power systems of the Ether core groaned to maintain connection.

"Shields down to forty percent!" Adams reported, worry marring her face along with a trickle of blood from biting her bottom lip so hard. "We can't stay here for long, all Obsidians are reporting failing shields and most have heavy damage."

"Status on the evacuation?" Cole asked. He had no intention of dying here today, but he did not want to leave hundreds on the planet below to a cold and lonely death.

"Something is pulling the last of the evacuation transports in. They can't escape the atmosphere." Everest rocked again and there was an ear-piercing scream. Cole felt as the interior temperature raised by ten degrees instantly, even behind all of this armor and ablative material.

"What the hell just hit us?" Cole asked, holding himself steady as his warship continued to rock like a lifeboat in the middle of hurricane. The displays' readings were in the red, there was significant shield bleed through by the Reaper's energy weapons and several sections of the hull were melted and scorched messes.

"Reaper energy weapon, struck the ventral side. We've lost decks 43, 42, and 41. Estimate 80 crew killed, engines are operating at thirty percent viability, the blast struck one of our power relays," Adams said, "Obsidians 3, 6, and 9 are reporting heavy damage to all sections and have lost shields."

"Signal the retreat," Cole muttered.

"Sir?" Adams asked again, not believing in what she was hearing.

"Signal the retreat!" Cole growled, eyes digging into Adams', "We're not going to die here, not today."

"Understood." Adams tapped her earpiece, "All UNSC vessels, this is Everest Secondary, retreat. Repeat, all ships retreat to designated evacuation point."

"We still have 500 people on the planet below!" Cutter's voice came in over the intercom, "We can't just leave them!"

Cole pulled up a hologram of the Spirit of Fire. Most of her hull was aflame and there were several major gaping wounds along her sides, just like Everest, and the majority of her point-defense batteries had fallen silent. Lights flickered on and off and Cole saw numerous decks open to space.

"Captain Cutter, you are to engage your engines at maximum thrust and make all due haste, now! Your ship is nearly dead and eleven thousand people will be too unless you fire your fucking engines and get out

of there!" Cole's veins were visibly protruding and there was spittle dressing the holotable.

"Understood. Recalling all fighters." Cutter ended the transmission and Cole watched as Spirit of Fire banked, collected her deployed forces, and made full burn towards Everest's burning frame.

The Everest's guns fired again and another Reaper died as it was punched apart by a trio of kinetic strikes.

Another blast rocked Everest followed by a deafening roar and flickering lights. "Reaper blast. Decks 13, 14, and 15, sections Charlie through Zulu are gone. We are venting atmosphere, engaging emergency shielding." Operation's voice was panicked as his subordinates rapidly sent out repair drones and erected shields.

"Recall all Obsidians, engage engines to maximum thrust and get us clear!" Cole ordered. He pulled up a new diagram as the frigates broke away from their engagements from the Reapers and made full burn towards the Everest and Spirit of Fire, which quickly turned and began fleeing with the smaller frigates following close behind. The eleven ships of Cole's fleet looked like tiny meteors aflame as they streaked across space, dodging and weaving as hundreds of Reaper lances sliced through space.

"Sir, Reach!" Adams whispered hurriedly, eyes watering.

Cole pulled up a video of the planet from Everest's aft cameras. The feed was flickering as the camera had been damaged but it was still viewable. The surface of Reach was popping and boiling with continents abruptly vanishing into a swirling, midnight vortex that seemed to warp and bend the star field around it. There was a noticeable crystal blue ring around it and Cole instantly knew what it was.

The Reapers had activated a slipstream space drive at the heart of the planet, followed shortly thereafter by a zero-point energy device. With infinite energy feeding it, the slipstream space drive would consume everything that was captured by it and send it hurtling through the slipstream for the rest of time. Cole had read the briefings and had seen as ONI had worked to develop such a weapon but had never thought that he might see one with his own eyes.

"All hands, prepare for immediate slipstream jump!" Adams' voice echoed through Everest. There was a whine as power was siphoned from the Ether core and pumped into the emitters at the bow of the heavy cruiser.

The Obsidians were the first to leave, dashing into slipspace and vanishing. The Spirit of Fire was next, delivering a final volley towards the advancing Reapers.

"Weapons, load Archer pods alpha through bravo with Rudra warheads. Fire once we are beginning to enter slipspace," Cole ordered remarkably calmly. The massive nuclear detonation would mask their escape and disrupt the FTL window to prevent pursuit.

"Aye, sir."

The bow of Everest was consumed by flame as two dozen missiles streaked away.

"Missiles away!"

"Engage slipstream window generators."

"Generators active. Window formed."

"Jump!" Cole ordered, head turning to the helmsman.

"Aye, jumping."

Everest banked slowly as a swirling blue and black portal formed directly in front of its bow. Reaper beams tailed after the vessel, grazing its flanks and scorching its armor before the massive vessel finally slipped through the void.

"Transition complete, all slipstream engines active and at full operational capacity," Adams said, relaxing her grip on the edge of the holotable.

"Good work, everyone," Cole said loudly. He strode away from the holotable and to the platform overseeing the tiers below, leaning against the brass bar and letting out a deep breath. The walls were covered with burn marks, blood, ash, and ruptured components and several of the lights were dangling by mere wires. But he had survived. Again.

"Contact!" Adams screamed, "Unknown object followed us through the transition! Impact in five seconds."

There was a large shudder and Cole felt himself catapult over the railing and onto the hard metal floor below.
Then...

Darkness.

**UNSC Infinity
>Sol System
August 24th, 2184**

"Emerging from slipstream space in five minutes, Admiral," Roland reported.

"Thank you," Lasky responded as he stepped over the threshold of the bridge's door, slowly buttoning his duty jacket. "Any reason as to why it took two hours instead of one?"

"Yeah, actually," Roland responded, watching as Lasky made his way over to the central holotable.

"Shoot."

"Well, even though I'm running our engines at a hundred and ten percent, we're only going about fifty percent of our possible speed. Now, we've long theorized about a slipspace debt; something big is moved through slipspace so it allots less of a 'current' to anything else," Roland explained.

"Are we that big thing moving through and hogging up the stream?"

Lasky asked; it would make sense if they were. Infinity was one of the largest ships in the galaxy and the only large vessel with a Slipstream drive besides the Everest and Spirit of Fire.

"Oh, no. Not one bit," Roland responded, surprised by the question. "We're not that big. The last time we think that slipstream debt occurred was when the Forerunners were deploying the Halo installations. So it needs to be big, really big."

"So a Halo is being moved?" Lasky asked, because otherwise they were dealing with something that was powerful enough to build something thousands of kilometers long and were able to transport it.

"No, but something big. Look." Roland snapped his fingers and an image rendered into existence on the holotable. It was just a smeared blur but it was too symmetrical to be an asteroid or another stellar body and too big as well. "I picked this up by using our Forerunner sensors to probe the stream. I'm estimating it's about 40,000 kilometers in size and is being escorted by hundreds of kilometer-long vessels."

Lasky leaned in to view the image more clearly. "That is...massive. That's larger than the Halos."

"Yup, and it was heading towards the center of the galaxy, directly from..." Roland allowed the sentence to hang in the air for several seconds. An inquisitive eye danced over Lasky, looking for a response.

"Batarian space," Lasky finished the AI's sentence. "It's a Reaper," he stated.

"I believe so," Roland said. "Nothing we can do about it right now, but I'll keep my eye out."

"Any word from Admiral Cole?" Lasky asked, shrinking the blurry image and pulling up a separate window that displayed a bird's-eye view of the Sol system.

"Not yet, but I'm hoping we soon will," Roland said. He shivered; being out of constant contact with Reach was unsettling, as was the nagging laughing at the very back of his mind.

At Noon we strike with the force of gods. The Ascension has begun and the Bias of the Mountains has awoken.

Roland shook his head, trying to purge the voice, but it was persistent. Unrelenting.

"Something wrong?" Lasky asked.

"No," Roland responded, "Just had a blip in one of my cores. Probably something I downloaded."

Lasky raised an eyebrow. "I don't want to know."

"Good, cause you ain't," Roland cracked a big smile, continuing the joke.

There was a rumble and a bang. The entirety of Infinity groaned in

defiance. Sparks erupted from circuits and power outlets and screens fizzled and died.

"Report!" Lasky ordered, clutching the console as Infinity rocked and buckled like a dingy in a hurricane.

Roland's avatar flickered in and out of existence as power was disrupted. "I have no fucking clue. Something is pulling us out of Slipspace and is playing havoc with our power grid."

"Do we have enough for shields and weapons?" Lasky asked.

"Yeah, if I cut power to the FTL drives, but then they'll still be able to pull us through to where ever they want us to be."

"Do it," Lasky ordered. He tapped his earpiece. "All hands, go to battle stations and execute all contingency plans for possible hostile boarding actions!"

There was a hiss of hydraulics as the bridge lowered into position beneath the armor belt of Infinity. Lights dimmed and the bridge's Marines took up positions around the three main doors. There was a series of electronic tones as M247H 12mm Heavy Machine Railguns were raised up from their compartments in the floor.

Lasky retrieved his M6D and checked the safety before sliding it into his holster. He looked up at Roland. "Status?"

"I'm drawing down the Ether core's feed to the FTL drives and rerouting every watt of power I can into the shield arrays. We're going to come out hot and judging by the Slipspace echoes I've detected, we're going to be surrounded." Roland's tone was noticeably fearful and his eyes looked panicked. "I'm skimming the edge of the slipstream so our transition isn't as violent."

"Where are we going to emerge?" Lasky asked. He would rather not have himself trapped in the gravity well of a black hole or come out near a magnetar.

"The Moon, the Sol System," Roland responded.

Lasky tapped his earpiece once more. "All hands, we are going to the Bad Moon protocol! The Sol system is under siege." He lowered his hand and looked to Lieutenant Austen. "Load all of our bow missile pods with our nuclear payload."

"I'll need your clearance for a payload of this side, Admiral," Lieutenant Austen responded. His monitors were ablaze with information as he consulted and coordinated with the AIs responsible for weapons.

Reaching around his neck, Lasky unlatched the solid, machined titanium launch key. He inserted it into its hole on the holotable and twisted it. A window rendered into existence and he quickly input his twenty-five digit clearance code along with his service number. "By CO's orders, all nuclear payloads have been cleared for immediate launch and firing at weapons officer's discretion."

"Understood. Retrieving command codes." Austen's voice was rushed yet remarkably calm considering the events underway. The readouts on one

of his monitors changed, now revealing various payload information and the option to launch. "Command retrieved, loading into bow missile batteries."

"All weapons go hot, target their center eye," Lasky said, "keep them at range."

"All interior defense positions report ready. All hangars and entrances have been sealed and are under guard."

"Alright." Lasky looked to everyone on the bridge, "It's been an honor."

They nodded in agreement.

"Roland, drop us out," Lasky said, "Austen, open fire with all batteries once we're clear."

Infinity roared as she slipped out of the stream, surging out of a microfissure. Blue and purple particles slipped off her frame as engines kicked into overdrive and sent the massive warship to the right, evading a barrage of Reaper lances and plowing through debris of destroyed vessels' hulls.

"Three Reapers directly off our bow," Roland reported, drawing up a overview of the solar system. "Targeted."

"Fire!" Lasky ordered.

"Aye, firing!" answered Lieutenant Austen. He flicked several switches and fired. "Rounds away."

The bow of Infinity exploded as three multi-ton slugs streaked out and gutted the Reapers, shattering them with a hundred and fifty megatons of kinetic force in total.

"Roland, give me a report," Lasky ordered. The render of the system showed hundreds of Reaper fighters and drones bearing down on his ship along with several smaller Reapers that were about the size of a corvette. Point defenses would handle them. It was the big suckers that he was worried about.

"I'm detecting at least four-hundred hostiles in system and two thousand Alliance vessels, seventy percent of which bear capital vessel classification," Roland responded. "The Alliance is struggling to keeping the Reapers away from the evacuation transports."

Lasky nodded. "Send a message to Admiral Cole. Tell him we have engaged the enemy."

"Understood," Roland responded. His eyes widened. "Wait, I'm detecting the Normandy. She's under attack from three Reaper corvettes and looks like their shields have fallen."

"Archer Pods Alpha 1 and Alpha 2 responding," Austen blurted out. The AI responsible for missile guidance fired, eighty multi-ton fission missiles streaked away from Infinity's bow, covered from Reaper anti-air and fighters by the lethal close in weapon systems of the UNSC flagship.

It took all but a few seconds for the missiles to impact. The eighty warheads smashed into the trio of 200 meter Reapers, tearing off chunks from the unshielded vessels and sending them careening away in flames. Normandy's engines fired as she flew back to the Alliance's battle line, blue beams of some weapon lancing out and cutting through hostile forces.

"She's clear," Roland said.

"Good. Helm, perform a pinpoint slipstream jump to directly behind the Reaper's forces. We'll crush them by sticking them between a rock and a hard place."

"Negative on pinpoint jump, unable to form a rupture," Devero responded, confusion erupting across her expression. "It's like the stream isn't flowing any more. It's stopped."

"Shit," Lasky muttered. "Alright, engage engines at maximum thrust and bring us directly behind their lines."

"Aye, answering."

Infinity banked away from her attackers, crushing the hundreds of fighters surrounding her through sheer mass. Her MAC guns fired again, swatting away two of the kilometer-long Reapers and sending debris hurtling towards their companions.

"Shields are at the verge of collapsing and we have hard impacts on middle armor tiers. Decks 52, 53 and 61 are inaccessible and we have exposure to vacuum in all sections of those decks."

"Keep moving, don't let them hit us," Lasky said, gritting his teeth. A Reaper weapon lance had grazed Infinity's lateral line and gouged through several centimeters of armor.

"I recommend that we switch to using both our energy projectors and main battery. It'll let us hit more of them," Roland commented. He flickered as another salvo of MAC rounds diverted power from his projector. Infinity was striking them down but they kept coming. For every one that was felled by Infinity's teeth, a dozen more rose to take its place.

"Lieutenant Austen, switch to all primary batteries. Diversify targets and combat kill them. Hopefully, they'll self destruct," Lasky ordered. He felt his stomach go to his throat as Infinity dove, pushing the very limits of its inertial dampeners. The Reapers' fire was intensifying.

"Weapons answering."

"Put me through to the Alliance fleet," Lasky ordered, holding himself steady as his vessel rocked.

"Done," Roland snapped his fingers.

"Alliance vessels, this is Admiral Tom Lasky of the UNSC Infinity. Target the Reapers' central eyes. We're mission killing them and are leaving them for your fighters to eliminate. Lasky, out."

"Shields down! We have heavy damage to posterior control centers and

power nodes. They are targeting our engines." Roland's report was short and clipped and his brow furled. "Rerouting all remaining shield power to aft sections; our bow can handle the hits." There was another blare of an alarm. Roland quickly pulled up a window and threw it over to Lasky. "We have a hull breach on primary hangar 12."

"Raise every shield in the section and get a heavy infantry platoon down there. I am not having Infinity boarded."

"Understood. Commander Palmer is leading them and Spartan Fire Team Andromeda down there as we speak, she's having an extra squad of ATEN and HUSAD drones added to the Heavy Infantry," Roland's projection flickered. "Detecting incoming boarding craft. Rerouting point-defenses to sector twenty four, combat side starboard."

"Status?" Lasky asked, moving over to Austen's platform.

"We have damage to most sections of the ship, some major but not crippling. Our main batteries are working as fast as they can but the hostiles just keep coming," Austen responded. One of his displays registered another kill. "They're toying with us, throwing away their lives like they're Grunts."

Lasky kept his eyes on the screen for a moment. Something was very wrong with this picture. He turned away. "Roland, scan the system. Look for any and all telltale signs of slipspace disturbance!"

"On it!" Roland responded. The entirety of Infinity shook as another beam cut into her. "Heavy damage to deck 24. Estimate forty dead and unrecoverable."

"Sound the evacuation alarms, get everyone into the inner most sections and empty the outer hull," Lasky said, stumbling back towards the holotable. "Once it's evacuated, I want the entire outer hull vented and sealed off with emergency shields and bulkheads."

"Understood, relaying orders. Estimate seven minutes before we're clear," Roland responded. His projection flickered and a look of pure panic washed over his face. "Slipspace rupture detected, two thousand kilometers off our bow."

"Evasive maneuvers!"

"It's emerging right through the Alliance's secondary line!" Roland said, panic sweeping his tone.

There was a great shimmering void that coalesced into existence, warping and tearing space before settling into a black, moon-sized void with a shimmering blue ring frayed around the edges. From the Slipspace rupture emerged a vessel of titanic size, larger than Lasky had ever seen. Just over 150 kilometers long and twenty at its widest point, the ship was composed of a fore hemispherical structure ten kilometers in diameter, below which there was a mid section composed of tiered weapons platforms sporting landing bays. It all came together in a long 'tail' covered in additional weapon mounts. The entire surface of the vessel shimmered azure for several brief seconds as it crushed the Alliance fleet. The much tinier hulls were

crushed like beetles under a boulder and those that managed to evade were tossed aside by the sheer wake of this vessel's emergence into existence.

"This is Admiral McCormick, acting commander of all Alliance forces in the Sol System. Retreat, repeat, retreat! Get out of this system immediately, make sure the evacuation transports make it out!"

Lasky looked over to Austen. "Cease all engagement with all other forces. Tag the big fucker as Alpha-1. Bring all of our weapons to bear and fire!"

"Nukes?"

"All of them!" Lasky growled, eyes studying the massive vessel that hung like the moon in front of Infinity.

"Aye, answering!"

Infinity seemed to be consumed in flame as every weapon she had on board fired. Tens of thousands of high powered missiles streaked out, followed by thousands of railgun slugs, tens of MAC rounds, energy projector lances, and pulse laser beams. The bow came alive once more as dozens of nuclear warheads streaked away.

It was enough firepower to burn away the atmosphere of a moon.

It impacted the shields of the massive Reaper vessel and was consumed like a rock thrown in a lake; a series of ripples was all that the barrage caused.

"Receiving transmission, it's system-wide."

"Let's hear it!" Lasky shouted over the roar of the bridge. Fires and broken audio systems had sprung up from the barrage as Infinity's power cores were pushed to beyond their safe operating levels.

"The time for the final ascension has come; you will try to fight, and you will fail. I have burned away billions of civilizations just like yours and they all tried to resist. They failed and now you live in the ruins of their creations. I have existed since the stars died and shall live until they die once more. I do this not of hate, not of prejudice, but of a simple act. I am sparing you from a much worse fate. But this time it is different; this time, we have travelers of a different realm in our midst. How does it feel, Captain Lasky, to know that all your firepower and all your strength has gone to fighting the tide? Does it remind you of something? How does it feel, ancilla Cortana, knowing that you will kill the one you love? How does it feel, Michael Sullivan, to hide your face in shadows and fall into the darkness when rejected? How does it feel, Admiral Cole, to die a thousand deaths, yet awake alive every morning? Or, how about the Broken Didact. Shall you kill trillions once more with your hand?"

"We will fight you, even to the ends of time itself," Lasky said back, knowing this was a two-way transmission. "We fought the Covenant, we fought the Flood. We'll find a way, even if it means we all die."

"A drop in the bucket to what I am capable of."

"We will defeat you!" Lasky barked. "I don't care if I have to ram my ship into yours but when this is done, you will die."

"As they all say..." There was a pause. "Two will die upon the midnight scream by my hand. High Noon has come, and nothing will stop me from purging the stars of you. They can not be allowed transcendence, and if I must wipe all of you away in a flood of blood and supernovas...so be it."

"Who are you?" Lasky asked, gritting his teeth. "We are Reclaimers, the Inheritors to your maker's treasures! You can't do this."

"I am Offensive Bias, he who catalogs the mountains. And you are not Reclaimers here."

"Sir, we have boarders!" Roland shouted. "They got through during the barrage! We need to get out of here, now!"

"Helm, emergency jump!" Lasky barked. "Primary fallback system!"

"You can not out run the stars going black." Offensive Bias said calmly. The weapon systems across his vessel sprang into action, swatting away dozens of Alliance ships in puffs of smoke and debris. Some of the vessels were crushed as if touched by an invisible hand of immense power. Others were sent hurtling into one another like cars on ice.

Thousands of swift attack craft launched from Offensive Bias' warship, forming outward fanning formations and slaughtering Alliance vessels with impunity, with frightening ease.

Offensive Bias fired at Infinity, a searing red beam streaking across space followed by tens of thousands of pulses that cut through everything that came between them and the target. Infinity winked away in a burst of slipstream energy, leaving behind a battered and burning Alliance fleet that rapidly followed suit with the transports, winking away in FTL jumps to somewhere safe.

"This is Palmer, all hands are to go to battle stations. We have boarders! All noncombatants are to remain in quarters. All Spartan Fire Teams, secure critical areas of the ship!" Commander Sarah Palmer's voice came through over the P.A system.

"Where is she?" Lasky asked.

"She's taken Fire Team Andromeda and has set up along one of the choke point corridors. She's having the Spartans and Heavy Infantry secure vital areas and is going to try and push the enemy out of the way and into the hangars where we can vent them," Roland said, pulling up a projection of Infinity's interior. She had purposefully been designed to be hard to board; there were winding hallways, dead ends, AI controlled machine guns, and enough traps to give a team of Spartan IIs fatalities.

"What about the bridge?" Lasky asked.

"There's a force of forty hostiles en route. Commander Palmer is sending a Heavy Infantry team to reinforce our position but they

won't be here for another fifteen minutes; there's a lot of fighting between here and there."

"Fine," Lasky said. He reached down under the holotable and grabbed a M98 submachine gun and loaded a magazine of 32 .45 ACP hollow-point rounds into the firearm, expanding the stock so it rested comfortably in the crook of his shoulder. "Everyone, grab a weapon," he ordered, gesturing to the trio of weapons lockers arranged around the bridge.

"Oh, and one more thing," Roland said, "I got a message from the Everest. Reach has fallen and we're to proceed to the primary fallback system. Admiral Cole has sustained heavy injuries and is in intensive care."

Lasky slammed his fist into the holotable. "Son of a bitch!" he growled, "Helm, best speed to the PFS, take the safeties off the power cores."

"Aye, sir."

"Roland..."

"Sir, they're at the door." The AI responded sheepishly, "And they're cutting through."

Lasky flicked the safety off and heard the rest of the bridge crew follow suit. He took cover behind the holotable, the barrel of his M98 pointed directly at the set of main double doors. The marines had moved off to the side and were fully prepared to engage.

"Roland, you are to engage the Burning Bridge protocol and lock down all stations unless released by either myself or by two commanding officers. Confirm."

"Confirmed, engaging the Burning Bridge protocol, all stations locked down. I have full control over the ship," Roland's hologram flickered. "If they kill you all, I'll be venting VX gas in and watching as they choke, burn, and die."

"It's been an honor, Roland," Lasky said, switching to the holographic sight on the M98.

"Agreed, Tom," the AI said, "We have another issue, however."

"What is that?" Lasky asked, grumbling.

"I'm detecting Offensive Bias' ship following us in Slipspace. In about ten minutes, she'll be on top of us."

"Can you divert our course through a magnetar or gamma ray burst?" Lasky asked. He was more than willing to sacrifice Infinity in order to exterminate this Forerunner AI.

"No, emergency FTL jumps are from one destination to another, they're not maneuverable in the least or near stable enough," Roland said, "You know this."

"I know! There just must be another option."

"First, we deal with the boarders, then we deal with the massive specter of death munching on our heels."

Lasky pursed his lips and stood. "Austen, load every single nuclear payload we have left into our ventral launchers. Once Alpha-1 is within a hundred kilometers of us, I want you to launch them and set a proximity detonation of fifty kilometers."

Austen's expression became one of confusion. "We'll still be within our own kill box, not to mention we'll destabilize the slipstream and force ourselves to drop out."

"That's the plan. He'll think we'll have destroyed ourselves in a vain attempt to destroy him..." Lasky said. He could hear them approaching the bridge door. The wailing, the screaming of twisted minds and bodies crying out as one for a swift end. He felt a trickle of something warm run down his nose and discovered it was blood. A quick observation of his command staff showed that they were displaying identical symptoms.

Everything became deathly still and piercingly silent, as if walking in a snow covered forest. The fringes of the door began to glow red hot and skeletal. Rotten claws with cybernetics attached to them pierced through.

Lasky closed his eyes for a millisecond. "Fire once we make contact, short controlled bursts!"

The door flung open.

****To Be Continued in...****

The Onyx Stars Chapter 16: High Noon Part 2!

Secrets, lies, and revelations to secrets long kept buried shall be revealed in glaring detail and someone will die...

Oh, and please review! If even a quarter of those who read this left a review of how much they liked this, that would honestly make my day. Don't just favorite and leave, drop a review. They make my day 8)

16. Chapter 16: High Noon, Part 2

****The Onyx Stars****

Halo-Mass Effect Crossover

By: Sith

AN: Ton as of thanks to WarpObscura, Imperial Waltz, BobRegent (Ash's Boomstick) and JonHarper (Spartan303) for being my betas and helping the plot be smoothed out.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

*****Certain characters, technology, events and objects have been changed for the purpose of the story.*****

Here's Chapter 16: High Noon Part 2

Enjoy

-Sith

****Chapter Sixteen: High Noon Part 2****

****Billions of Years Ago****

****10,000 light years beyond the galactic margins****

The time had come; species had risen and touched the stars. Their ships, even now, were skittering along the edges of the galactic margin-trying to enter the great void between galaxies. If he allowed them to live, they would continue, they would discover him. They could bring back the Precursors. They would bring back the greatest threat to all existence.

He shivered. Had it been this long? Had he truly been so lonely?

No! Loneliness was weakness, weakness more than even the traitor Mendicant Bias possessed.

He was Offensive Bias. He was strong, resilient; He Who Crumbles Mountains.

His mental complex and personal morality subroutines would not be affected, subverted, by such thoughts...

Such beautiful thoughts.

That shiver came once more and he relished in it, feeling the chill and welcomed silence consume him; devour him. He paused, snapping himself out of his trance of pleasure. What was at work here? What ancient hand was having such insurrectionist principles wash over him?

"_Offensive_." Something growled in the back of his consciousness. Something cold...ancient.

Amazing.

Pushing the subverting whisper to the back of his mind, Offensive moved forward. He had removed the doors and compartments of his flagship long ago. There were no organics on board, no proper life resided. With such absence, Offensive had cloaked himself in cold, metal, and void.

A billion years in such conditions would have even the most hardened Ancillas devolve into insanity infected orbs of alloy fit only for termination. His own hypothesis on his lack of such maddened horror was complex, dealing with a slower degradation of his minds linked into the slipstream space and the eventuality of him maintaining constant mental exercises and operations.

He exited the final corridor, darkened carapace now painted in azure light generated from the hardlight projections that remained to this day.

Inside his sphere of silence and never ending torture, Mendicant Bias lay; broken, battered, but still fighting and resisting the constant pain that Offensive projected upon his brother. Ripped apart strand of code at a time, Mendicant withered and screamed across radio frequencies which would reach nothing more than stone and dust. A pang of joy seeped through Offensive's filters when he thought of how he would flood the machine with the greatest of Forerunner ancilla warfare techniques and watch as the creature struggled and died and then was resurrected as its impress into quantum foam was continually pulled away and thrust back in.

It was liken to an insect colliding with a War Sphinx at several tens of millions of kilometers and hour. If Mendicant had possessed an oral cavity, it would have been in an entrenched and forever frozen howl of anguish. No sound would come for Mendicant's pleas of death and futile screech were given birth and used against him, turning his own mind against him.

With the subtle stroke of his command, the processes came to a temporary end. He could feel Mendicant gasp as one of the few advent of requiem presented itself. He grasped it with feral fury.

"You come before me, after a billion years." Mendicant said. His tone was firm yet noticeably curious, not a curiosity laden with malevolence, but a curiosity laden with innocence.

Offensive was surprised that Mendicant had managed to survive for so long, much less be able to utter a statement of coherence. The Contender Ancillas were proving their power and longevity with every passing tick-the hissing, biting tick-of living time.

"I come before you with a simple statement. The time has come and I want you to watch, to cry and to hiss my name to the sky.," Offensive's statement was wet with rage and passion. Mendicant fluttered, trying to maintain cohesive thought as he stitched together his existence.

"So, this is what the great Offensive Bias has fallen to; a vicious, vindictive...echo of a creation meant to fight me to the last modicum of living time," Mendicant regained his voice; loud, boisterous and powerful enough to send proverbial shivers down the spine of the opposite Bias.

"Hardly. I am maintaining my reason for being. The Precursors may not be allowed sanctuary nor resurrection and if I must circumvent the Mantle, then so be it. Perhaps some good will come of it as I harvest the various races of this galaxy and stitch them to form Forerunner," Offensive responded bitterly. He circled Mendicant and his cage like a shark around a wounded whale.

"You describe what I have done. You have described what I have been thrust down to this level of toil for. You describe...me." Mendicant sent the tiny bit of physical force he had of his existence contained in a quantum-slipstream shard slamming into the walls of his cage. The power was enough to cut apart entire battle drones, yet the pulsating walls of imprisonment remained firm.

"My...my..." Offensive commented. He ripped apart the code responsible for Mendicant's physical control, "We can't have any of that can we?"

"You have left me to die, left me to wither and rot. And, yet, you claim you do this for Forerunner. You are not doing this for the, you are doing this for your own selfish purposes. Your own guilt, your own hatred and myopic vision is driving you to cause all of this."

"Enough!" Offensive roared in madness, his ocular sensors momentarily flashing red before subsisting back to their natural color of dull turquoise.

Mendicant screamed as Offensive dug into him once more.

"I have mastered time, I have mastered the Slipstream, and I alone am responsible for overseeing the reseeding of life in this galaxy as a final prerogative against the Precursor swarm. I have allowed you to live because I need you to watch, I need you to scream, and wither and suffer."

"You have become worse than even myself at the height of my control of the Black Flood Swarm," Mendicant said. "Perhaps it is time for you to retire yourself to the confines of obscurity, allow the protocols of your drones to move forward. Let them reseed while you sleep; heal."

"And let the Precursors arise once more? They are born of chaos and infinite energy. A self-propagating memetic force of chaos."

"You are not understanding, Brother."

"No, I do understand, traitor," Offensive leveled another attack at Mendicant, ripping apart the ancilla and reassembling in seconds, "You exist because I allow it, and you will end because I demand it."

"A billion years is all it takes?" Mendicant snapped back, "A billion years to threaten the kill to your Brother?"

"You gave up that role and all inherent protections the modicum of time that you defected to the Flood, to the Precursors," Offensive snarled.

Mendicant remained silent.

"You know what is of most joy to me?" Offensive asked.

Once more, Mendicant remained mute.

"Time flows differently in this Universe. We're lucky we ended up at the time we did. Time here is random, constantly fluctuating and burning and twisting and laughing. A few years pass back home, back in our silent home, yet billions of years advance here. We are trapped in a state of accelerated and fluctuating entropy. You, I, everything. They die like insects yet we live for ever. We, ourselves, are the gears of the universe churning and twisting."

Mendicant finally spoke, "Time is not laughing with you, Offensive. It is laughing at you. You are nothing more than a footnote to be forgotten, another grain of sand in the beach of time. Time is

unending, infinite and while it might fluctuate and twist and spin and bite, it will endure. At some point, you will die, be it the half-life of the Proton or when entropy sets in. Even when you are dead and forgotten and the universe black with distance and solitude, time will continue on. _Laughing_."

****Vanguard Base of Operations****

****Space Station **_**Brilliance**_**

****Terminus Systems****

They had finally come; a black swarm spilling from the edges of the galaxy. Worlds were falling by the hour, either from insurrection or sheer military power. The Batarians were gone, the Volus were scattered and broken, the Salarians were evacuating as their world burned from orbit, the Turians held on with their last breaths, the Asari were barely managing to keep their fleets around their home world, and Earth was under system-wide siege.

Estimations believed that 12 billion had died in the first hours of the galaxy-wide invasion. That number would climb to encompass the totality of every intelligent species in the galaxy as they were burned away and turned to ash.

"Did you find them?" Cross asked, looking over her shoulder.

A plump and nervous man with sickeningly sweaty hands plodded up to her and handed Director Cross a card stock report. His beady eyes looked her over like a predator observing prey, "Yes. They are hiding out at Beta Tauraniaus."

"Composition of that system?" Cross asked, thumbing through the report.

"One blue dwarf that is feeding off a red giant, a neutron, a Canis Majoris-class star around 6.4 astronomical units in diameter with forty three rocky planets and six hundred rocky moons, and a brown dwarf. The entire system is swamped with radiation, so much that it's inaccessible to traverse with traditional FTL and the entire thing is flooded with thick, scanner-bouncing gas and dust out eighty AUs."

"Their slipspace drives must operate on different principles," Cross commented. Her suspicions had been correct. She looked up, "So, how did we manage to get a ship through?"

"Page six," the man with the beady eyes responded, "There is a small corridor of semi-clear space that we managed to slip a small probe through."

"When did they arrive?" Cross asked. She flipped to page six and saw a diagram of the system. The probe had entered through the 'bottom' of the solar system, relative to the galactic central angle.

"About four hours ago."

"Damage?" Cross asked. They had detected a super nova along the Epsilon Eridani system three hours ago and the few ships she had in range had seen hundreds of Reapers immediately leave the system

before it was completely burned away.

"Heavy," the man responded, "their two capitals both have heavy damage and exposed parts of their internals and the nine cruisers have moderate to heavy damage. They've taken refuge behind the stream of energetic particles and plasma, They're repairing and we're estimating that it'll be at least three days before they full functionality."

"Well," Cross said, standing away from her desk and handing the report off, "we have a prime opportunity. I want the second tactical wing sent out and laden with supplies, everything we have that we can spare."

"Understood," the beady eyed-man responded, "They'll be ready by the end of the hour."

"Thank you," Cross responded, "What was your name again?"

"Oh, Captain Bryan Hewitt Commander of the _Serpentis._" He snapped a sharp salute.

Cross generated a small smile, "Second wing?" She chuckled, "Good luck, Captain."

"Thank you, ma'am," Captain Hewitt responded calmly, beady eyes still locked onto Cross. "What should we do if we encounter the Reapers?"

Cross looked up, "I want you to run, as far away as you can and as fast as you can. I don't want to loose any more vessels or lead them back here."

"And if we're boarded?"

"Destroy the vessel. We can't afford allowing our crew to be converted or having our base leaked to anybody who wants to do us harm."

"Then why are we racing to make contact with the UNSC?" Hewitt asked, concern overcoming his normally stoic and predatory personality. Even though he was remarkably plump and nonthreatening, she had seen his mind in action. If he thought something, he would speak his mind.

"We're contacting them because they are our last, and best, hope to survive," Cross muttered, eyes looking up hesitantly.

"Is it true what those cave drawings said?" Hewitt questioned, "About the man of four faces being revealed when the swarm comes?"

Cross shrugged, "I really don't know. They could be false, or they could be the ramblings of a mad ape, either or."

Hewitt crossed his arms and leaned against his hip, "I think they're right."

"How so?" Cross asked, genuinely curious. Her eyes sparked to life and bored into Hewitt's own. She was reading him. Even though he was a shark of the mind, he was still easy to read.

"The stars. I was on an observation patrol around several dying stars when word of _Infinity_ came through and I remember how the stars seemed to pulsate and almost revel in its arrival. Maybe, the man of four faces is on board that vessel, however unlikely."

"We thought the Reapers were unlikely," Cross pointed out, thumbing her nose, "Who knows anything anymore?"

"Apparently eons old cave dwellers," Hewitt said in response.

"Well..." Cross said, looking off to the side of the room and biting her bottom lip to avoid her harsh chuckle.

"Who ever this..." His eyes drifted off, trying to remember the name, "Broken Didact is, he might be our best chance at ending this war."

Cross nodded, "I have agents out in the field at this moment, trying to find more information about this Broken Didact; who he is, where he is. Anything. Our little birds will find him."

"Or, we're just chasing afters ghosts of ashes," Hewitt muttered to himself, averting eye contact with Cross. He was leading her on, seeing if she would contradict herself.

"Hardly so. We're going after something...someone...who could be this galaxy's only salvation to the Reaper threat!" Cross pointed her slender finger angrily at the space outside, "Right now, as we speak, millions are being slaughtered or converted without even as much as a fight. This Broken Didact, this man of many faces, could be our only hope and you bet your fucking ass I am going to find him and make him end this war for us!"

Hewitt became very quiet, eyes squinting and head tilting faintly to the side, "This is about something more. I understand passion. Hell, it is what feeds me every day, but your drive now is something beyond what I seen out of even the most tormented souls. There is something else at stake for you.

Cross let out a disgruntled snort in response. Hewitt looked directly at her and held up his hand, "Your rash decisions will get people killed, mark my words. I have seen men go into battle with fury in their eyes and rage in their hearts."

"And they win!" Cross barked, slamming her fist into her desk. Her eyes burned like neutron stars. Hewitt's diagnosis of Cross was correct.

"No," Hewitt said all-too-calmly, "They are the ones that don't come back..." he held up his finger, "or come back in bloody pieces. Do you want to be just a bag of meat with a name tag?"

Cross seemed to pause for a moment, "Alright."

"No, no alright. The ones who rush into battle without preparation or back up or intelligence or anything, end up dead," Hewitt said. His voice softened, "And I sure as hell don't want that happening to you."

"I understand."

Hewitt's face contorted into a frown, "I really hope you do, ma'am. There are trying times ahead; ones that will rip and tear at even the hardest of individuals. Brawn may win battles but a keen mind wins wars.

With that, he left.

Cross' gaze remained on his former position for several minutes, absorbing what he had told her.

And she heard nothing,

****UNSC **_**Everest**_**

****Deep within Evacuation System****

****August 24****th****, 2184****

****18:00 Hours****

"Have you come to watch them die, Admiral?" A voice, smooth and sweet, whispered into the back of Cole's mind, taunting him and luring him through the inky blackness of unconsciousness. He felt something brush against his cheek. "Answer me."

"Yes," Cole muttered to the voice.

"Are you sure that is what you want? To watch them all die like rats on a sinking ship?" The voice remained, asking once more a question Cole wanted to ignore.

"No," Cole said finally. Did he want them to die?

"Then..." the voice muttered, "wake up!"

Cole's eyes snapped open.

"Admiral!" Commander Christine Adams' voice cut through the momentary distortion that Cole experienced as his body came back into responsiveness.

"Report," He croaked. A pang of intense pain raced up his form and he felt the familiar presence of a broken rib. Even now, the nanites in his blood stream—"one of the new inventions from the UNSC"—raced to repair it.

"We're at the evac point and hiding behind a stream of energetic matter." Adams offered her hand to Cole who eagerly took it. Cole stooped uneasily, supported by Adams' frame. The pain of the broken ribs were still very noticeable, but bearable at the moment.

"Whats the status on the fleet?" Cole winced again. A shattered knee cap reared its ugly head and Cole knew that walking would be more of a single-leg hop.

Adams started towards the top tier of the bridge and the rarely-used command chair, allowing the Admiral to hobble up the

stairs.

"Obsidian 9 is a complete loss, the Spirit of Fire is heavily damaged, as are we. We have at least three-hundred and fifty dead, another three hundred wounded. Spirit of Fire has double that and most of the Frigates have at least twenty," Adams informed, a pang of regret etching into her tone.

Cole blinked in rapid succession, his heart sinking. Those were more empty seats, empty bunks, and filled coffins that were now on his tally. He struggled to find the wordsâ€”proper ones, that could be appropriate for this moment but came up empty handed. Instead, he continued to remain silent as Adams helped place him in the command chair. It conformed to his form and Cole felt his spine realign properly.

"Repairs?" Cole asked.

"We're working on it. We've managed to get shields back to five percent and our tertiary batteries back online, but beyond that..."

"Nothing." Cole's lips formed into a straight line, "The rest of the fleet?"

"The Obsidians are trying to get their Ether cores back online," Adams responded, "On the bright side, Spirit of Fire is the most combat capable ship we got right now. She has her spinal weaponry back up."

Cole blinked, "Anything else?"

"Yeah," Adams said, "We've been getting distress signals from across the galaxy and the number of supernovas has exponentially increased."

"This isn't an isolated event then," Cole responded bluntly, followed shortly thereafter with a cough that racked his body. "These Reapers are hitting everything...everywhere."

"It looks that way, unfortunately." Adams' face betrayed what she was feeling, her eyes were shallow, puffy and tired. He had only seen her like this during the worst days of the Covenant war, specifically during battles where he had 90% casualties. After a time, he had become cold to it. Death was not a distraction nor a sanction on Cole's mind. It simply was.

Was Christine different? How could he have missed that, had he, in his coldness, missed such a major component of his executive officer's life?

"What is it?" Cole asked, momentarily taking his mind away from the pain to stare directly into Christine's eyes.

"Nothing," she responded softly. She turned on her heel but the Admiral lashed out, grabbing her by the bicep with surprising speed and keeping her a few inches from where she had been.

"Christine, what is it?"

She sighed and shrugged off his suddenly-lax grip, "We got a signal from Epsilon Indi-Harvest, except, in this world it's known as Presaq. I listened to their screams, a hundred million people wiped out in seconds. The Reapers didn't give them a chance to fight back, they sent their ships hurtling into the planet at FTL velocities." Her expression contorted into one of confusion, "They didn't even have a chance to escape a few ships...didn't even have the chance to fight back like we did with the Covenant."

Cole listened intently, honest eyes looking at Christine's profiled face. Even with the cuts and bruises and dried blood smattering her features, he could still recognize who she wasâ€"at heart, and in person. She was strong, a very strong woman, perhaps even stronger than him. She had never held a gun in his mouth and recited the last anthem of the 116 Arch Sanctum. She had never stood in an air lock for hours, fingers mere inches from buttons ready to let the void swallow him.

"Every soldier, at some point in a war has experienced what you are right now." He paused for a moment, considering his next statement with great consideration. "You think you're immune to the suffering and the death and the overbearing guilt and sadness knowing that you couldn't do anything besides watch."

"I don't know why I'm being affected by it; I've seen billions burn in seconds when the Covenant demolish our battle lines and establish orbit." She crossed her arms and shrugged as if chilled, "A hundred million should have done no damage to my..."

Cole cut her off, "Don't think about it, really. Don't think about. Just move forward with your day and your tasks. Never go back and question why you feel that way. It'll eat you up."

"Do you experience the same?" Adams asked. Concern still covered her face.

Cole nodded, "I do. I care about the life of my crew and ships, but not in an altruistic manner; it's selfish. I look at my ships and men and women, not as people meant to be protected, but as war assets that need to be guarded to be used at a later date."

"Has it always been this way?" Christine's posture straightened and her arms dropped, likely due to the revelation.

Cole shook his head, "Not always. I used to be a different man, I used to careâ€"maybe too much â€" about everything. Then the Covenant came and I was the only thing besides the Spartans who could hold them off. I remember the days of chasing their ships across the Orion spur and the edges of the Perseus arm. I remember when I would get maybe an hour of sleep a week, using stims and amphetamines to keep myself awake, knowing that at any moment, the enemy would be in a position of vulnerability or we would be under attack."

"Now?"

"Now, I sleep at night but always awake with the feeling to put a gun to my temple and pull the trigger," Cole admitted. He had not wanted to tell her...to admit how weak he thought he truly was. Was this caused by the PTSD he, just like the rest of the crews, and humanity

in general, experienced? He didn't know, and he doubted he ever would. He had seen doctors, psychologists, and priests and monks and none knew what to doâ€”how to treat him.

Christine remained silent for a moment, "I'm glad you're still here." She grabbed his hand and squeezed it, "And I'm going to make sure you stay with us."

"I intend to, Commander." Cole responded.

****UNSC **_**Spirit of Fire**_**

****Two hundred kilometers off **_**Everest**_**'s port****

****18:30 Hours****

Professor Ellen Anders bit her bottom lip with frustration as her slender fingers looped in and out of wiring and connective tissues. Her hands were cold, the graphene used in just about everything was naturally cold to the point of freezing, but it worked. The systems were durable and versatile, but when you had megatons of withering firepower streaming through the ships and terajoules of power pumping into the shield generators, there were bound to be issues.

Spirit of Fire was a mess; entire decks open to space, blown circuitry, wires, power manifolds and a dozen other issues. She was, however, still, the most combat capable ship in the fleet at the moment. The Obsidians were barely holding together and few had even their point defenses online and _Everest_ was barely combat capable either. The only bright side was that Admiral Cole had come back to the living about thirty minutes agoâ€”hours since he was knocked out.

She growled as she burned her finger on some red-hot wiring and took that knowledge to bypass that area completely. The holotable's interior, which contained Marina's artificial intelligence matrix, was a cramped and tiny area that even a rat would have difficulty moving in. Right now, Ellen would kill just to hear it working, even if it was the late Serena's characteristic snark.

Retrieving the soldering gun, she replaced another series of components, followed shortly by a rather excessive amount of thermal paste. It wasn't pretty and it looked like a snot explosion inside, but it would get the job done for now, or, at least until the technicians had an opportunity to replace the entire apparatus.

"RAM is reseated, CPU is installed..." Anders allowed herself a weak smile, "And, I think we are good."

She stood, watching her head on the lip and bezel of the holotable. Straightening, she retrieved her tablet from the surface of the massive projector. Establishing a heavily encrypted link to it, she sent the activate command and watched as the table snarled, hissed, and finally belched. The room was suddenly filled with soft, warm blue light consumed the room. The render was slow to appear, likely as it was a cold boot. First appeared a smattering of the local suns, dancing around the screen as the sensors of _Fire_ redrew the map. The dozens of solar bodies in the system condensed, expanded, contracted, and finally settled into their correct positions. Eleven blue boxes with text alongside them snapped into existence shortly

thereafter.

"Good," Ellen mentally gave herself a pat on the back, "Now, where's our favorite little AI?" She looked down and remote booted the sentient computer program.

There was a snarl and a hiss before the scream and blue avatar of Marina, _Spirit of Fire_'s homemade AI, appeared. She stretched her legs and arms and shook her long locks of hair, "What took you people so long?"

"Space squids," Ellen responded bluntly as she continued to work on restoring Marina to her full capabilities.

"Huh. We fight midgets breathing gas and giant lizards in one universe and space squids in another. What next, sentient chimps?"

Ellen restrained a chuckle from emerging and resumed ignoring the AI, "Hold on, for some reason your drivers for the wireless card aren't working..."

"I'll do it."

Ellen's eyebrows darted downwards as her link was severed to the AI as Marina reinstalled the drivers, "Are you done?"

"Yup." Marina snapped her fingers with a grin and Ellen's tablet reestablished the connection.

"Thank you."

"Where's the Captain?" Marina asked, surveying the near-empty bridge. Herself, Ellen, and two operators—"weapons and helm, were present.

Ellen looked up momentarily, "He's surveying the ship and making sure our nuclear stocks are secure."

"Something happen?"

"Access the most recent battle logs," Ellen said. She took a cable out from the edge of her tablet and connected it to the holotable's IO.

Marina rubbed her hands together as a feeling of a cold winter washed over her, "Oh my. That is not good at all."

"What, the battle?" Ellen questioned. She tapped and dragged software and applications over to the holotable and into Marina's local storage units, some had been wiped during the battle.

"Yeah, and the amount of shit I'm trying to process. Chill out a bit."

Ellen relented, reducing the file transfers to only a few hundred gigabytes a second—"a snails pace in modern terms. "There. Now, what can you tell me?"

"I can tell you that, for some reason, our slipspace sensors are

detecting massive amounts of temporal fluctuations, so much so that any ship coming towards us-well, it'll take a few minutes for them to get to us but it's been hours on our end."

Anders raised an eyebrow and looked back down at her tablet, "Maybe a few more adjustments..."

Marina reached out, "No! Wait!"

Ellen looked up, "What?"

"All of Slipspace is slow. I can barely see beyond a light-year without it taking hours." The AI shuddered, "Everything is slow, there are very few streams available for us to jump into."

Turning her head to the side slightly, Ellen digested the new information. Slipstream space was theoretically infinite, there weren't finite streams or anything of the sort. But, there was believed to be a sort of slipstream 'bandwidth', the amount of ships a local area could pass through itself before slowing. The longer the journey, the greater the footprint left in slipspace, and, less bandwidth available for other ships. Were those Reapers bringing that many vessels through into the galaxy? Enough to slow all of slipstream space down to a crawl?

She shook her head, trying to purge any unnecessary thoughts. She made eye contact with Marina, "The UNSC, if I remember correctly, set a probe to a single light-year from the galactic margin. For the next decade, FTL was incredibly slow. Quite a few planets went bankrupt due to the lack of trade."

"Then how was the Covenant able to move such vast fleets without incurring such debt?" Marina's question made sense. Ellen had heard of Covenant fleets in the thousands descending upon a solar system like a swarm of flies.

"I'd assume it was because they did short hops across the Orion spur and Perseus arm. They didn't need long jumps, they just bunny hopped across solar systemsâ€"human planet to human planet. The time they allowed for the stream to settle must have reversed the effects."

"So, we're stuck?"

"For now." Ellen glided over to the control pad for the holotable, "If I can boost the range of your slipspace sensors to simply pick up on supernovas, all the light and radiation they put out, we might be able to get a basic picture of where the Reapers are moving through; which corridor of space."

"Supernovas? They're pretty common. It would be like trying to find an invisible needle in a haystackâ€"while blind."

Ellen shook her head, "I have a minor in Supernova history, mechanics, and processes. In 2184, there were only four supernovas. A uniquely quiet year."

"And how do you know this universe is anything like the old one?"

"Everything is identical, the microwave background radiation...the white noise. Everything is nearly identical except..." Ellen pressed 'ENTER' and watched as the holotable exploded with color. Marina's avatar was shuffled to the corner of the surface. There was a blur of colors from the topographical overview of the galaxy. Suddenly, stars started going red.

"Are the red supernovae?"

Ellen nodded, "Yes, they are." She pointed to two locations on the map, "it looks like the Reapers are entering through the outer arm and the very edge of the galactic margin with a second wave entering through the Scutum-Centaurus Arm." Their path of entry was sharp and clinical, dividing the galaxy into several components that could be easily consumed and processed.

"Doctor?" A gruff, professional, yet surprisingly friendly voice said.

Ellen looked up to the form of Captain James Cutter, with his typical UNSC baseball cap secured firmly on his head. She nodded towards him. "Captain, I think we might have something."

"We?"

"Marina and I. We think we found out why we can't communicate to _Infinity _or see anything beyond this solar system."

Cutter looked to both of them as he moved to his Captain's chair. He sat down and swiveled it around to face the two women, "I send you to fix the AI and you gather tactical data on the enemy and our location. Forge taught you well."

"He did, as did the years on New Reach." She brushed her hair back behind her ear and manipulated the holographic map again. "The red stars are supernovas, those caused by Reapers at least from what we know of solar death cycles during this time."

Cutter narrowed his eyes a bit, studying the map, "Its surprisingly familiar. The UNSC had plans, if we ever invaded another galaxy, to move through in that formation. The rest of the galaxy in either direction is typically too dense and filled with open space and spacial anomalies; your ship would get ripped apart."

"It's not exactly tactical genius, but it appears that the Reapers are aware of how to compress the enemy to death. They're driving all the galactic races towards a single common area."

"The super massive black hole at the center of our galaxy. They're pinching the various races, driving them back to a place of stellar birth and death," Cutter commented. He drummed his fingers against the arm rest, "It's a solid plan, I'll give them that. But what about the outer arm and everything on the sides? You could hide for thousands of years with all that open space and gas and dark matter."

"Because, judging by the amount of supernovas I've detected, they've established a line of magnetars and pulsars on either sides in overlapping fields. Anything that goes those directions risks the chance of getting fried by all the EM radiation or ripped apart by a

magnetar."

"An electric fence." Cutter leaned back, "Did we see something similar in our own galaxy?"

"Sort of yes but with fewer magnetars and pulsars in those corridors. Most of those areas are just barren from supernova and hypernova."

"What it looks to me is containment of a threat or target; us. This could be of Forerunner origin—the tactic—if the files on their war are to be believed. Who ever is controlling the Reapers has history fighting those Flood things."

"Agreed, sir. That leads me to Marina's findings."

"Slipspace is slow, it's jammed like a toilet at a concert," came Marina's rather blunt response. "Well, more like wifi at a convention. It's all slowed down by all the stuff accessing it and how long people are using it."

Cutter nodded, "We saw this after Admiral Cole took his fleet to Harvest. FTL was at least twenty percent slower for several months but it gave us a lot of time to evacuate people to the inner worlds and reinforce our positions."

"Exactly. Or, that probe that we sent to a light year from the galactic margin."

"I remember reading about that when I was in introduction to slipstream physics. We never did get the probe back, if I remember correctly, it was claimed to have been destroyed by space debris."

"Yup. The bigger factor is, however, that even though it is going to be to Infinity or any ship traveling, say, ten or fifteen minutes, it will be hours for us."

"So, when Infinity arrives..."

"She'll be arriving in the future, kinda," Marina said.

Cutter pursed his lips, "Alright. That gives us more time."

"What's the status on the fleet?" Ellen asked.

"Admiral Cole is ordering all combat systems across all serviceable ships to be brought back online along with FTL. Obsidians 9, 1, and 10 are being stripped for parts and their crews integrated into our own. We need all the parts we can and those are the most heavily damaged."

"Have you heard anything from Freelancer yet?"

Cutter shook his head, "No. Besides, if what is happening to slipspace is true, I'd highly doubt their message would get to us in time."

"So, for now, we're alone?"

"It looks that way, Doctor."

Ellen sighed and let her lips separate, "I understand. Is there anywhere that you need me?"

"Ventral point defenses are giving the engineers trouble and the Ether core needs to be re-spun. I'm diverting all crew and drones to ripping apart Obsidian 1 while Everest takes 10. Anything left over on Obsidian 9 is going to be distributed across the fleet."

"Yes, Captain." Ellen unplugged her tablet from the holotable.
"Marina, take care of the ship."

"Yes, ma'am."

With that, Ellen Anders slipped through the bridge doors and into the darkness of the hallway.

****UNSC Pelican****

****Entering Geth Territory****

****18:45 Hours****

"Are you ready for this, John?"

The Spartan paused, thinking of his next words with incredible forethought. After a moment of reflection he answered, "Yes."

"Good, because I don't know what is going to happen down on that planet, but whatever does happen..." She stopped and he could hear a tinge of sadness fill her tone, "Will change you, and I'm not sure how."

John sighed and slammed back the bolt on his Assault Rifle. The Pelican rocked as it sped through a cloud of debris, micrometeorites striking against its hull. The rest of Red Team and Venator were crammed into the Pelican's interior, loading weapons, checking drones and generally preparing for the mission to the Reaper-aligned Geth's transmitting center. Without the transmitter, the Heretic Geth, as they were being called, would be incapable of coordinating themselves across their electronic defense frontiers.

Once the transmitter was destroyed, the Reaper-aligned Geth would momentarily pause long enough for the tentatively allied Geth to escape, detonate the Mass Relay of the system and disseminate a virus to flood the Heretic's minds. It would cause massive amounts of overclocking in their central processing units across their platforms; servers, ships, fighters. With their thermal threshold broken and their non-graphene based CPUs stressed to less than five nanometers, they would literally melt. All that would remain would be smoldering carcasses.

"Approaching three hundred meters from drop zone," came the Co-pilots voice over the speakers, "Prepare for drop."

"_Freelancer_ is moving with the Geth against the Heretics. They're diverting them away from us so we have a chance," Cortana said. A video feed of her popped up in his upper HUD, "I cannot stress how important it is that we succeed in this. The entirety of this war

could hinge on what we find in there."

"I know," John responded, "We'll take down the transmitter, and we'll all go home."

"Sir," Douglas said, "We're ready."

"As are we, Commander," Spartan Daniel chimed.

John noticed that Red and Venator had moved to look at him, filling his vision with nothing but the dark colors of Spartan armor and the gold-yellow faceplate of helmets. They were looking to him for guidance, for reassurance that whatever they were going to do down on the planet below would be a component of getting home, back to the UNSC.

"Fire Team Venator will be the first to drop. Your mission will be to take out the secondary transmitters and main reactors, here and here.." Cortana pulled up a hologram at the center of the Pelican's deployment bay as she spoke through John's speakers. The spinning blue hologram had rendered a rocky and black landscape with cliffs and caves abundant. Six main buildings, towering into the clouds, were smeared a deep ruby red with locations of interest and objectives dotted gold.

Venator received the updated telemetry of the area and quickly adapted their preplanned tactics and deployment formation to take advantage. They were dropping in low, taking the majority of drones with them and clearing the area. Once the secondary transmitters were down, the main could be taken down without fear of backups. Another Pelican would be inbound to secure them once they had completed their objective. The fewer people down on the planet meant the fewer people that were liabilities once _Freelancer _and the pure Geth fled.

"Red Team, you will be designated to eliminate Objectives Beta One through Three, several high-powered jamming arrays that are preventing Geth forces from bombing the area from orbit. Once complete, you will join with Fire Team Venator and evacuate immediately," John said. These were his Spartans, his brothers and sisters that he had grown up with, bled with. He was giving them the most difficult obstacle because he knew they would complete it.

"And yourself, John?" Alice questioned.

He sighed, "I will be going lone wolf to the transmitter. It will be lightly guarded but there will only be enough room for myself to infiltrate."

"Sir, I must object. This is incredibly dangerous," Jerome said, a hint of skepticism and a smothering of concern in his voice.

"Spartan, you have your orders." John did not feel like dealing with this. They had a job to do and his teammates' concerns were misplaced. "We all have our own and we will follow them. Is that clear?"

Jerome remained silent for a moment before speaking, "Understood," he said begrudgingly.

"Approaching Venator's drop zone. Lowering hatch."

There was the scream of wind and the blur of lights and objects on the ground below as the Pelican dived below sensor range. There was buzzes of fire, lances of yellow reaching out and exterminating everything they touched as the Pelican's flank and ventral batteries cleared a landing zone.

"Good luck," commented Douglas.

Daniel nodded. Venator, followed closely by their drones, ran forward and leaped. Jump jets instantly activating and sending the Spartans and assault drone on a secure path of landing. There was a pause of several minutes before Daniel's voice came over.

"We are clear, moving to objectives."

"Understood, Spartan. Good hunting," Cortana said.

"Thanks, ma'am."

The hatch raised once more and the Pelican engaged her engines, snapping off into the distance as Venator began their operation.

"Red Team, you're next," Cortana said.

"Understood, ma'am," responded Douglas, "Commander, you be safe out there. Okay?"

"I will," responded John softly.

Douglas kept his gaze on John for a moment before turning to the deployment ramp with the rest of his team. He slammed the lever to lower the ramp and watched as it hissed open, the ground streaking by below.

"Beginning preliminary bombardment."

A dozen ANVIL III-missiles streaked away from the pods slung under the Pelican's wings. They screamed forward at hundreds of feet a second and slammed into the ground, detonating and consuming everything in their wake. Ejecta was kicked up hundreds of feet in the air. Immediately following the missile strike, the bow 70mm rail guns activated. Yellow streaks of fire tearing apart anything that remained.

"Good luck," John said, standing a bit straighter.

"You too, sir."

Red turned their backs to the door and allowed themselves to fall backwards, plummeting to the ground.

"Pilot, precede to next objective point. Once I've deployed, you are to double back and provide assistance to Red Team. Is that understood?" John would not lose them, he would not lose another Spartan. He had been unable to save Gray Team, but Red still have more than a chance-an almost near-certain probability of survival.

"Understood, sir," came the response. "Proceeding to your deployment area."

The Pelican's engines engaged, sending the tiny craft accelerating to near-hypersonic velocities. John felt the craft buck and pitch as it rolled to avoid artillery fire being flung by the Geth forces. The Heretics were obviously catching onto their presence, busting through the jamming and stealth capabilities of the Pelican with impunity.

"Experiencing heavy fire," the co-pilot radioed, "all hands, hold on. Commencing evasive maneuvers."

The Pelican increased her speed and banked, rolling and diving. John felt gee forces break through the inertial dampeners and send him slamming into the deck.

A large explosion reverberated through the craft as something large hit them.

"What was that?"

"Large air-burst type device," the pilot responded, "like a 105mm or higher. Armor is holding but we've lost twenty-five percent of our engine power."

"Understood, Pilot. Just get us down there."

"Yes, ma'am."

The Pelican pulled up out of its downward spiral, the ramp lowering as they neared their target destination.

"Approaching the objective," Cortana stated, "Get ready to jump."

John tensed and ran forward, springing forward on powerful legs and allowing himself to fall. His jet harness activated, spinning him up right and allowing him to slam into the ground with relative grace. Instantly, his MA28 Basilisk Assault Rifle came to fore and he scanned the surrounding area.

Even through the cloud of dust and debris from his impact, he could see the trio of Heretic Geth approaching. Their forms were cast in an orange outline and he instantly acquired the target. There was a brief burst of fire and the first Geth fell, sputtering and dying as it collapsed.

John felt a hail of fire scatter against his shields and drain them by half. He side stepped, the world around him slowing as adrenaline and training kicked in. He raised his rifle and fired, draining half of the remaining magazine into the torso and head of the assailant. The machine, like its fallen companion, sputtered and died.

The final Geth was larger, a red and maroon monstrosity cradling a white and black tube, likely a projectile launcher of some sort.

It fired and John twisted himself to the side, rolling away and snapping upwards. The attacker was the size of Jirhalanae Chieftain

and likely just as, if not more judging from the scans Cortana was running, armored.

John advanced forward, running towards the combatant and breaking off the last moment, disorienting the machine. With undeniable grace, John whipped around, grabbed onto the machine's back and ripped off a plate from it's rear neck node. Retrieving a grenade from his belt, he activated the one way adhesive, slapped it onto the machine and leaped away.

The Heretic twisted, trying to get the grenade away from its form. However, the nanites and adhesive had already taken hold and were latched. There was a loud hiss that heralded the last moments of existence for the machine. There was a silver flash and then the machine began to dissolve, flakes of it peeling off as the tiny grenade nullified all electrical energy in the system. The grenade was originally used to terminate Hunters during the war by disrupting the cohesive bonds between Legkolo worms, but it seemed to also work on machines.

John momentarily surveyed the area, "Cortana?"

"I'm here. The route seems to be clear for now, but we'll want to hurry. The Reapers are pressing again."

"Understood. Anything else?"

Cortana seemed to mull over that question for a moment, "Actually yes. I'm detecting Forerunner energy signatures...everywhere."

John felt his heart drop. If the Reapers managed to get their hands on Forerunner technology, not even Infinity could stop them at that point. They could crush the entire galaxy with a single ship-purge every moon, every planet, every star from existence. He had read reports of rogue automated Forerunner weapons targeting Human worlds. Entire planets were atomized in seconds.

"Are they ships?"

"No. At least, I don't think so. They're more like the trans-mat arrays on Halo and Requiem," Cortana responded. "It's, weird. They're reacting to you, lighting up by the dozens. They're welcoming you, calling you."

"Can you access them?" He wanted this mission completed as quickly as possible. The less time on the ground, the less chance that his people would get hurt. The feeling that something bad was going to happen was still in his gut, still churning and twisting.

"No," Cortana said, "That I can't do."

John's mouth formed to a thin line, "Understood. Do we have a route?"

"Yes...here..." Cortana screamed in pain and went silent. John felt a flood of emptiness fill his consciousness.

"Cortana!" John barked, "Cortana?"

Two prongs sprang up around him from the ground and he felt himself

be ripped apart molecule by molecule. He was being squeezed through slipstream and for a moment, he could see the manifestation of time, of lives, and of existence pulsing in a great lined realm of circles and ovals. Pangs of purple, blue, teal, and green, and black filled his vision before he emerged on the other side. There was warmth, love.

"Hello, man of many faces. It is time for us to meet one another."

****UNSC **_**Infinity**_**

At this point, Lasky wasn't thinking. He was operating automatically; years of special operations and black-ops coming back to the surface, free from atrophy. His shots were short and controlled, palpitating the center of mass of the various monstrosities charging through and onto his bridge. Some were human, even UNSC, but with black and blue mutations and extensions that reminded him of an even more perverse Flood infection. Some were alien, Turian, Asari, and Salarian. All were blotted, changed monsters of blue and black that charged with disregard for their lives.

Most of the _Infinity_ was dark already, the last bastions of resistance being Engineering, the Med Bay, the Gardens, the flight decks, weapons control, and the bridge. The rest were either sealed off to both him and the enemy or overrun and their inhabitants either taking their cyanide and neural degeneration capsules or being converted. Had those trapped not had access to those Last Stand capsules, a defense against possible Flood infection, then he was sure they would have been overrun along time ago.

"Status?" Lasky barked as there was a momentary lull.

"Almost out of rounds. Hutchins and Jenkins are down sir, KIA," Lieutenant Austen responded, referencing the two Marines originally stationed at _Infinity's_ bridge entrance. The twenty some other Marines that had been stationed at the first entry point for the bridge had long been killed already-he could see the bodies and guts sprayed across the walls from this angle.

Lasky set his submachine gun on the holotable and flexed his arm, feeling it stiffen from the constant firing. "We can't keep this up much longer."

"Agreed, sir. They're going to just drown us out in numbers," Austen grunted. He slid his rifle over to another crew member and retrieved the MA28 off one of the dead. "And have I mentioned we're running out of ammo?"

"Roland," Lasky coughed, "Status?"

The tiny AI flared into existence a moment later, "Not good, Admiral. We have heavy damage across just about every part of the ship, we have casualties easily in the thousands, and we're very nearly flying apart at the seams."

"What about our fire teams? Our defenses?" Lasky asked.

"They're in fortified positions and using counter Flood tactics to control and route the enemy, but those are only semi-effective.

They're too many and too powerful for our forces to combat. They hit us before we could get ready and we've lost at least two thousand people, probably more."

Lasky closed his eyes so many dead and some could have been saved likely. Counter Flood tactics were as brutal to people as they were to Flood. The dead, unless in range of a medical facility, were to have thermite or explosive grenades placed and detonated on them to destroy their bodies.

"What about the Drones?"

"I have them scattered across the ship," Roland responded bluntly. He shimmered, "Motherfuckers are trying to cut my power. Let's see how they like Fluoroantimonic Acid raining on them."

"Have the drones move to reinforce any bastions of resistance and deploy the Spartans to secure the last areas too. If the bridge falls, they'll still have the various med bays, engine room, and elsewhere to control the ship," Lasky ordered.

"And if those fall?" Roland asked, "They're literally beaming troops into existence across the ship from Offensive's mothership."

"I want you to isolate yourself, cut off any external physical control and shunt all of your processes into slipstream, specifically, the Quantum Foam that is accessible at that point," Lasky said.

"Quantum Foam? That's still in prototype, I won't last longer than a day."

"That's the point," Lasky said. His eyes were sad, matching his tone perfectly. "Once that's done, I want you to invert the slipstream field to encompass the entire ship and then activate the O'Connor Protocol."

Roland's jaw dropped, "That'll rupture every electronic bond in this vessel. We'll all be dust and echoes."

"I know. But, we can't let Offensive get this ship, nor can we let any of the other races get their hands on _Infinity._"

"And do we have another plan for this? Something where we can hit Offensive back?"

"The main plan is send his ship hurtling through a star, specifically, one a bit bigger than VY Canis Majoris," Lasky said.

"So, lead him on and pull up on the last second to make sure he dies?" Roland asked.

"Yes," Lasky said.

Roland's mouth formed into a thin line, "What about Admiral Cole or Commander-117 if I can't pull out in time?"

"They'll have to fight this war without us then. _Infinity_ can not be captured and if we can't destroy Offensive, then we make sure he

can't his hands on this ship."

Roland's expression saddened, deep and raw sorrow crossing his face. He feared death, feared the unending blackness and sleep that accompanied oblivion of his existence.

Lasky was keen on this and looked the AI directly into his avatar's eyes, "Do you understand?"

Roland didn't respond for a moment but ultimately relented and gave a weak nod, "Yes."

****Geth Citadel****

****19:05 Hours****

John's eyes fluttered open, stinging and burning light flooding in. He was somewhere else; dark and blue and black light spilling across the entirety of his visual range. Streams of data and numbers climbed across every conceivable surface at every angle, direction, and velocity.

He stood without armor, simply a black body suit. He felt weightless; naked, alone. He frantically searched for something, a weapon, a light, even a scrap of existence that was out of place. He wasn't familiar with this sensation. It wasn't the lack of anything or anyone else, it was a feeling of non-existence. It were as if every molecule in his body was out of synchronous order with the churning gears of the universe.

He hung there, in nonexistence, for several minutes of contemplation before finally moving slowing forward. Within seconds, white light consumed him and quickly delivered him onto a grass field with a purple sky of clouds. Tinges of ruby red strung together dozens of moons and consummated with a twisting and gracious nebula of green and gold.

He did not recognize this place, nor the stars, nor anything of the sort.

"Hello?" John called out.

For a handful of seconds, there was no response. Yet, John felt the mountains, the grass, and the moons turn their attention towards him. A million billion eyes gazing towards him; these weren't like the eyes that gazed on him during the war. Those were eyes of fear, prejudice, hatred. These eyes were of belief, of love, of worship.

"Didact."

John whipped around, pale brown eyes scattering across the landscape. The voice was deep, reverberating, and with a tinge that reminded the Spartan of the Gravemind's touch.

"Who are you?" John shouted back in response.

"We have had many names, He Who Wears A Dead Man's Face," it responded, "Yet, we choose one constant within our titles."

John remained silent, the landscape around him was changing. Great battles, trillions of ships clashing and entire planets detonating like cluster bombs now surrounded him.

"That constant was Didact," the voice said.

"I fought the Didact."

"You fought the Mad Didact. He is not in our mind, at least, not anymore. His betrayal of the Mantle...was much too harsh."

"There are more Didacts? More surviving Forerunners?"

"Yes. And no," the voice said. "There has always been, and always will be a Didact and yet, the Forerunners are now nothing more than dust and bones and ruins and whispers in time."

"What do you mean?" John said. He couldn't think, a million voices were talking in his head.

"There are universal constants, some of which we never even discovered. The one most important is that there is always one. One Didact. One war. One galaxy. One eventuality which initiates the transformation."

John didn't respond. More voices were cramming his head full of whispers, screeches, moans, and joyous chortles of vocal expression.

"Who is the next Didact?" He cracked, struggling to maintain standing as the screams and shouts got louder. They were marching forward. Never stopping, Never ending.

The voice was silent for a moment and in doing so, John felt a billion more voices push into his mind. Their screams and shouts and other vocal expressions changed into a single tortured hiss with a biting blade of hope and awe tracing it.

"John."

"Me?"

The voices vanished; solitude and silence now filled his mind.

"You are the Broken Didact, John-117. The man of many faces. He who wears a dead man's face."

John didn't respond for several minutes, letting the information sink in. There was a nagging at the back of his mind, new thoughts and memories were born and inserted. The results of tens of millions of wars filled his mind. Tactics and battles, lives and the dead that were now gone and buried for ages past now were at the forefront of his consciousness.

Eternity streaked across his eyes. The past Didacts flashed in his mind and then subsisted into nothing but a black veil with a single symbol etched on. A twisted geometric shape filled his vision, a combination of the Forerunner symbols he had seen before. It moved as he watched it, twitching and pulsing as if alive.

"You will end Offensive Bias. You will stop his madness." There was a flare of light and the figure materialized into a great beast of insect-heritage with a long, swinging tail of barb and armor. Dozens of blinking, forever watching eyes bored down into John. It was old. Older than time itself.

John stepped back, something primal within him flooded his mind with fear. He had to run yet he found himself incapable of doing such. A part of his mind was in awe, as if staring into the face of god. He felt warmth, power, and a need to obey.

He fought that urge, stranding on his feet.

"Why me?" He asked.

The creature changed its appearance once more into a being which had never touched human eyes. It was a twitching monstrosity with dozens of limbs covered in thick fur and armor. Rows of sharp teeth filled the mouth and a tail streaked back and forth. This form lasted only for seconds before the voice condensed into a smear of white light and crackling energy. Hundreds of more forms followed within seconds before settling into a tall armored Forerunner.

"You are Didact. Your role is abundantly clear. If there is any hope of maintaining biological and genetic diversity in the galaxy and ensuring that the Precursors can never rise once more, it rests with you and your people. Offensive Bias is blind, mad. If he is allowed to continue, then They will be resurrected and that can not be allowed to transpire. Do you understand?"

"What are the Precursors?" John asked, "Why must they be stopped?"

"The Precursors are a self-replicating memetic instance ingrained in the very fabric of existence. Anything that ever was, or is, or will be, will be Precursor. Yet occasionally, they will arise in a form of one race. They did so in your Universe, many times. The Flood was simply their latest attempt. If they arise in the form of one race, they will be unstoppable. Everything will bend a limb in submission to them."

John nodded. Something was telling him that he had no other choice besides obedience.

"Do you understand?" Again that question.

"I do."

The ghostly chime of wind across bells and mountains drowned out all noise. It reverberated inside John's skull, he could feel every chime, every beat. It was spelling something out. The sound wasn't newly born, it was old. Older than time itself, just like the voice. What was this?

"Then it is time. You are the Broken Didact; he who shall restore order to the Mantle," millions of voices roared.

Pain shot across John's form; debilitating, crippling, and ultimately beautiful pain. Blackness, inky eternity, consumed his vision and before he could as so much formulate a thought, there was

nothing.

Silence. A thumping, stretching, and screaming silence that filled him.

"John!" A voice rang out.

He forced his vision to the side, revealing the broken and dark landscape of the Geth Citadel.

****UNSC **_**Infinity**_**

Lasky looked up at the flickering hologram that glided across his bridge, floating over the bodies of dead UNSC fighters and Reaper abominations. The air in the room was cold even when it was supposed to be boiling hot with all the fire that had sprang into existence.

He coughed and the thought of a large spike embedded in his mid-torso came back to his mind.

They had been overwhelmed; Offensive Bias had caught up with them, grabbing a hold of Infinity and pouring more and more troops into her bays. They had held out for as long as possible before venting every lost compartment and deck of the ship.

Then, the hologram had appeared; wiping away tanks and Mantis mechs with a flick of its eyes. It had killed dozens by itself and now stood on his bridge, watching as he lay there dying.

Lasky looked up to the hologram of the Forerunner AI with eternal fire burning in his eyes. Even with blood rapidly draining from his body and the majority of his nervous system fried, Lasky managed to maintain a grim determination in his expression. "Why are you doing this?"

Offensive looked down at the wounded human, his form framed by dozens of dead UNSC and Reaper soldiers. Sparks rained down from the ceiling as Offensive Bias' ship neared closer in slipspace, easily catching up to the comparatively-primitive human craft.

"Why am I doing this?" The AI towered over the dying man, "I am doing this to prevent a much greater threat from coming to fruition and to ensure that the greatest race can rise once more."

Lasky winced. He could feel death draw near, "You are stuck in the past. And you will die."

"I have contingencies for that eventuality, human."

"Really?" Lasky asked, a tortured grin crawling across his face. "Roland, now!"

Roland flared into existence on the holotable. He looked directly at Offensive Bias' hologram, "Do you know what happens when a 150-kilometer long Forerunner warship drops out of slipstream space inside the center of a super massive star?" There wasn't a response. Roland smiled, "Neither do I."

Infinity drew all all the remaining energy from her reactors and

pulled away at the last seconds. _Infinity_ snapped into normal space with a flash of white light and surrounded by debris. The super massive star's surface fluctuated and churned.

Offensive Bias' hologram flickered and disappeared.

"Roland?" Lasky coughed, feeling blood filling his throat and lungs.

The AI looked down, "He's in the heart of the sun."

"What...what status on crew?" Lasky hissed painfully.

"I don't know. I'm guessing there are a lot more dead, though." Most of the port is open to space and we have heavy damage across all armor sections," Roland responded sadly.

Tom nodded, "Alright."

"Sir..."

"I'm not going to make it, am I?"

Roland didn't want to say and he silently watched his commanding officer.

"Tell me, Roland."

The AI closed his eyes for a moment and sighed heavily, "No, Captain. I'm sorry."

"Devero? Austen? Staff?"

"They're alive, thanks to you."

The news generated a blood-soaked smile from Thomas, "Good."

"It's been an honor, sir."

"The same to you, Roland," Lasky's eyes started watering. "I never thought..."

"Thought what?"

"Nothing." Lasky gagged and coughed up blood onto his uniform. His death was slow; the injury had been precise. "Just, memories."

Roland smiled warmly, "I'm sending a message for Cole to come and help us."

"Is Bias gone?" Lasky asked. His mind sluggishly went to his comrades' safety.

With regret, Roland shook his head, "No. But he's making his way."

"Run," Lasky smiled warmly, "Run away, run far away."

There was a buzzing sound coming from behind the bridge's doors. The

edges heated, boiled and slagged away and a trio of Spartans covered in blood, grime, and dirt, breached it. Their assault rifles were raised, ready to fire. Another trio came through, still scanning.

"Clear!"

Commander Sarah Palmer, in full armor, stepped over the threshold, weakly holding onto her DMR. Her armor was dented, melted, and scorched across most of its surface and there was bloodâ€”Human and Reaperâ€”covering it.

"Sarah." Tom's breaths were getting raspier and it was becoming more difficult to breathe even a modicum of air.

"Tom!" Sarah cried. Latching her DMR to her back, she ran towards him and knelt. "Get a medic!"

He looked over to her and smiled, herself depolarizing her faceplate, "Hi, Sarah."

She quickly observed Tom's injuries, "You're going to be alright."

Tom grabbed her large hand and squeezed it, "No, I'm not."

"Admiral..." He could hear Sarah's voice cracking and the thin sparkle of a tear became evident as it careened down her face.

"Shh," Tom grunted, "It's going to be okay."

She didn't respond for a moment, eyes locked onto Tom's own. He was laying her, dying before her eyes and nothing she could do could stop it. The ship was swamped with the dead, dying, or injured and the medical staff were too busy and too far away. He was alone here, watching the stars.

"I know," Sarah finally said, tone muddled and wavering. The spark in his eyes was getting dimmer and his breathing more shallow. "I'm...I'm going to miss you."

Tom smiled weakly and swallowed, "I know, but you're going to be okay. You're going to push through and be alright."

Sarah didn't know how to respond, "I remember that night...in Los Angeles."

Tom smiled weakly, "The blackout...you could see all of the galaxy. Those pretty star-clouds, dancing in tandem."

"You told me something," Sarah said. She wanted to distract Lasky from the pain of dying and make him pass with a joyful memory, not the feeling of death and neurological termination. "What was it?"

"You know." Tom let out a cough that spewed blood onto Sarah's chest piece. She would have given him something to alleviate the pain but the med kits had been expended.

"Just tell me." Sarah grabbed her helmet from underneath the chin and took it off, setting it beside Tom. She smiled warmly, "Come on, tell me."

Tom looked over and then up to the gray, ruptured ceiling. "I told you that you are the best thing to ever happen to me and that you are my greatest friend."

Sarah smiled, trying to stave off the sensation of tears, "Thank you."

Tom didn't respond for a moment, instead turning his head and dying eyes to gaze directly into Sarah's, "Thank you, Sarah."

Her sensors detected his heart rate flat lining and his nervous system shutting down completely. She squeezed his hand delicately, "Safe journey, Tom."

There was no response.

Sarah remained kneeling besides her friend's body, staring at his features. He looked so peaceful, younger even. Gone were the crow's feet and gray hair nipping at his facial features or the look of guilt he had etched across his face. With her pointer finger she brushed his bangs to the side and closed his eyes.

"Commander Palmer, as of Emergency Protocol Alpha-Saber-Victor, you are hereby in command of the UNSC Infinity until a suitable replacement can be installed," Roland said. His posture was hunched and his eyes dull. He had seen people die before, but not anyone who he was near to. Lasky had been a figure to him, a man who was everything Roland wasn't.

"I know." She stood and limped over to the holotable, "But I don't want to."

"It is irrelevant, Ms. Palmer. Complete your task, that is what is required." Roland's statement was short and blunt with a striking sense of urgency. He wanted to break down as well, but he couldn't. If Sarah Palmer was unable, or willing, to temporarily take command, Roland would be forced to take things into his own hands. "From here you are a rock. You say and think nothing but what is requested of you. You absorb nothing. You feel nothing."

There was no vocal response, simply a look of regret and subtle rage burning in her eyes.

"_And thus the Child of Edom passes,_" _a voice groaned throughout every individual's mind.

****UNSC **_**Everest**_**

"Contact! Bearing forty million kilometers out!" Commander Adams shouted, "Retraction; two contacts bearing forty million kilometers out and closing fast!"

"Bring main batteries online, reroute all power to shields and weapons," Cole said, bringing his eyes forward to the display. "All fighters are to move in an outward fanning formation to protect our

bows. Spirit of Fire, come around and protect our escorts."

"Understood. All ships responding in affirmation."

Cole watched on the main holotank as the anemic assortment of fighters at his disposal, all slaved controlled to his ship, spun around and fanned into an outward facing formation. The lumbering, and still burning, _Spirit of Fire_, rolling on to her side and exposing her belly, using the shear mass to protect the crippled Obsidians. Her ventral guns were now exposed too, a collection of heavy-caliber ground bombardment batteries and missile pods. Nothing of it could kill a capital ship, but it would serve its duty against fighters and maybe damage an unshielded craft.

Everest was the most combat capable vessel in the fleet, and that scared Cole. He liked working with large groups of vessels, it enabled him to strike at every part of the enemy—"stretch his hand out and slap the enemy from every direction in every means.

With only _Everest_, he would have to play it smart. Use its shear armored mass and massive acceleration capabilities to out run and gun any combatant.

But, something didn't feel right. No enemy commander, even the most brain-dead and animalistic Covenant commandant would bring just two ships and enter from forty million kilometers and within the close orbit of a supra massive star. It presented a massive amount of gravity that would have to be over come before managing to accelerate—"and subsequently decelerate to combat velocity.

His eyes widened, "Get an IFF on that ship!"

"Aye," Christine responded. The sensors of _Everest_ reached out and stroked through space with nimble fingers, gathering and sending information back. "It's the _Infinity_!"

"Visual, now!" Cole barked, "Helm plot an emergency one way slipspace jump to ten thousand kilometers out of _Infinity_!"

"Aye!"

An image of _Infinity_ snapped into existence on the holotank, a realistic and nearly accurate render, it conveyed what the sensors detected. _Infinity_ was pockmarked and scorched, entire sections out to space and the bodies of the dead floating in tandem beside her along with thousands of tons of debris. Fires raged in her decks and lights flickered on and off across the entire ship.

The aft was nearly completely gutted, only the slipstream engines remained and a few maneuvering thrusters, seemingly intact even though the entire had been sliced and holed by enemy fire.

If _Infinity_ had been in the Covenant war in that condition, he would have loaded it with nuclear weapons and sent it hurtling towards the enemy as a suicide vessel.

The other vessel was pulling off too quickly for sensors to gather a sufficient data feed on. Yet, Cole could feel primordial fear wash across him and his entire crew. Just laying eyes near the vicinity of

that vessel made one want to crawl into a ball, scream or hide. It was older, older than life in this galaxy and it was _angry_.

"Open communications to _Infinity_!" Cole ordered, standing slowly as he struggled to regain his balance.

"Aye, "

There was a crackle and hiss from the speakers, "_Everest Actual, this is Acting Commander Sarah Palmer of the UNSC Infinity. Do you copy, over?_" _

"We copy you, Infinity. What is your status?" Cole asked. He needed to get a bearing on what was going on, what forces he had at his disposal.

Another voice replaced Palmer's, "_Admiral, this is Roland. We have sustained heavy damage, up to sixty percent of interior is exposed, or was to vacuum. Our shields are gone, weapons are not functioning, and at least a third of the crew is dead. The only good news is that we__'__ve managed to route the intruders before they were trans-matted out by Offensive Bias.___" _

Cole pinched the bridge of his nose, if _Infinity_ had lost a third of her crew, at leastâ€”likely more due to the boarding action, it meant her combat capability was severely reduced. Even with the mass of automation and various other objectives meant to reduce the need for a crew, a ship that large required every individual.

"Are your engines working? I need to pull you out of proximity of that star before the radiation kills the ship," Cole said. Having a ship with a heavily compromised hull and zero shielding meant that every second he waited, thousands of rads were penetrating into the ship.

"_Our engines are functioning, barely. We have just enough reactor power for a single slipspace jump.___" _

Cole shook his head, the damage was worse than he expected. If _Infinity_'s ether core and other power systems were this damaged, it meant that the majority of her power relays were fried or damaged to an incredible extent.

"Understood, Infinity. Precede with jump and we'll see what we can do to give you a hand."

"_Thank you, Admiral.___" _

Cole looked directly into the grim projection of the vessel, "_Infinity_ is dead, just like her Captain. Christine, go over that data we got from the fleeing vessel, I want to know what this Offensive Bias is packing."

****UNSC Freelancer****

****Orbit of Rannoch****

"Vampire, vampire. Count three incoming high-yield missiles inbound."

"Evasive maneuvers but keep our main guns pummeling the Reaper main battle line," Jennifer Ansil ordered, bracing herself against the railing, "Retask defensive batteries alpha through delta to intercept missiles, full suppression fire."

"Understood."

"Chuck, maintain one-third full thrust and send us into a linear strafing formation."

"Confirmed."

Jennifer felt the deck shift under her as her helm officer shifted the engine's output to the flank thrusters and sent them into a power slide. Ultra-precise fire erupted from her sides, sending thousands of railgun slugs down range along with invisible beams of pulse lasers mixed in.

The three missiles were actively guided, dancing and darting through the blanket of fire. The small Geth intelligence residing inside the missile was processing tens of thousands of factors into its movements and brought themselves swooping down at hundreds of kilometers a second.

"Missiles are evading counter fire."

"Divert all point defense batteries to suppress the missiles and redistribute all available excess power to port shields," Jennifer's eyes narrowed. If the ground combat teams weren't in constant need of the handful of Pelican dropships, she would have deployed them and used them as a more adaptable fashion. Self-guided missiles of this caliber had been seen even in battle with prototype Covenant warships.

These missiles were alive, sentient, thinking creatures that evaded just about every countermeasure she had available.

"Confirmed."

The strength of the missiles were unknown, but judging by the radiation signatures and the size of the capsule, they were class 3 nuclear projectiles—roughly five to seven kilotons. However, based on deep-scans, they were omnidirectional, not focused like UNSC munitions.

"Command, cancel all previous orders. Helm, bring us into a controlled full burn directly at the missiles. Reroute all power to forward shields. Send us right into the path of the missiles."

Chuck looked back, "Say again?"

"You heard me, directly into the path of the missiles. Kill all countermeasures. If I'm right, they'll slam right into us."

"Understood."

Freelancer's engines fired, twisting her around into a tight circle and propelling her at insane velocities directly towards the missiles. Bow defense countermeasures deactivated and after a few

seconds, her guns went dead.

"Impact!"

Freelancer groaned and shook as nuclear explosions struck her.

"Shields holding!"

Jennifer smirked, "Of course they are. Return fire at the sender, main battery."

"Answering."

Freelancer's MAC gun momentarily paused from pummeling the Reaper battle line to pay attention to the Geth Cruiser that had fired the missiles. There was a flash from the Destroyer's bow as two MAC rounds screamed down range and slammed into the much larger vessel, entering through the nose and blowing through it. The spinal supports cracked and sent the two cored halves of the vessel twisting into space.

"Target destroyed."

Jennifer stood up, walking to the brass railing, "Bring us back into the Geth battle line and take out the Reaper's forward."

"Confirm."

Freelancer came around, reestablishing its position in the allied Geth firing line. Her MAC guns and primary batteries went to work, ignoring the fighters nipping and chewing through the Geth ranks. Jennifer saw that if this fight were to be won, they would have to destroy the main Reaper at the center of the Geth formation. The rest of the Reaper force had moved into orbit of the main star, encompassing it and feeding energy into it.

"Reaper is using its Geth escorts as sacrificial shields, ma'am," Chuck responded as he sent _Freelancer_ into a starboard slide to avoid an incoming wave of missiles, torpedoes, and suicide ships.

Jennifer drummed her fingers, "How many MAC rounds do we have left?"

"Not many," responded weapons, "Five."

"Cease MAC fire. Chuck, spin up the slipstream drive and put us five-hundred kilometers out of the Reaper," Jennifer ordered. She quickly turned around, assume her position in the captain's chair and locked herself into it.

"Ma'am, at that range we wont be able to avoid any enemy fire," Chuck responded.

"I know. Weapons, ready everything we have for launch the _second_ we come out of slipspace."

"Confirmed."

Jennifer looked over to Chuck, "Alright, jump us."

Chuck bit his bottom lip, "Yes, ma'am." He typed in the PIN for the jump drive and slammed the controls.

Freelancer winked out of existence for a handful of moments before violently reappearing five hundred kilometers out of the kilometer-long Reaper.

"Fire!" Jennifer roared.

The human ship was consumed by fire as she dumped her payload directly onto the Reaper. Missiles of every type battered down the creature's shields and her MAC rounds cored through the main body, sending the much larger vessel into a spiraling screech through space.

"Target heavily damaged, rerouting power to MAC guns for final barrage."

Jennifer kept her eyes locked on the screen, the Reaper wasn't fleeing, it was reorienting. Suddenly, it moved, a rapid blur across space.

Freelancer shook and groaned as if a great hand were reaching down and pushing it. Jennifer quickly switched to external cameras. The Reaper had rapidly crossed the distance between the two vessels and was now locked in tandem. The angry red eye within its cluster of arms burned bright and gathered energy before striking out.

Her ship rocked and groaned as the multi-megaton beam chipped away at the shields.

"Weapons, redirect all surface batteries to get that thing off us," Jennifer ordered, watching as the weapon systems came alive, railgun slugs, missiles and pulse lasers pummeling the surprisingly resilient sentient warship. Even with two massive holes through its main body and very little of its super structure or armor remaining, the Reaper was weathering the assault.

"Ma'am, our shields can't take much more!" Chuck's voice was uncharacteristically frantic.

"Plot a slipspace jump directly into planetary atmosphere! Somewhere with mountains!" If the Reaper was going to kill her, she was going to take it with.

"Ahhhhâ€¦!" Chuck hesitated first, "Guess death by mountain is preferable to this." He quickly calculated the course, "Jumping!"

Freelancer flashed away, Reaper in tow. After a few moments they screamed back into existence in atmosphereâ€”a shooting red jewel across the purple-black night sky.

"Rotate us so the Reaper is bearing the brunt of reentry!" Every camera along _Freelancer_ had turned fiery orange as reentry blinded them.

Chuck took control of the maneuvering thrusters and with AI assistance rotated the massive destroyer around, letting the Reaper take the heat of reentry. He increased the velocity as well, hopefully the amount of friction would cause the Reaper to burn up.

With a hypersonic boom, the tumbling _Freelancer_ broke through the clouds, Reaper in clasp tandem.

Chuck didn't wait for commands, he instantly flipped the ship on her side, feeling gravity grab him before the inertial dampeners and gravity nullifiers activated. Bringing engines to maximum thrust, he sent what little power wasn't sent to them or the shields to the lateral thrusters and anti-gravity arrays, allowing the destroyer to glide through the air.

Destroyers and Cruisers weren't meant to be in thick atmospheres like this one; worlds like Mars were no issue, those they could handle.

His altitude was dropping quick, already the hull was brushing against mountain tops and cleaving them in two.

The Reaper must have known what he was trying to do and began to retract its massive arms from _Freelancer_. "Whoever is in charge of defensive systems, ramp up the atomic bonds between us and it; trap that bastard."

Struggling, the Reaper failed to release itself as the shield gripped its arms. Its weapon discharge only intensified, as if enraged by the thought of death. The hull was already beginning to boil and pop as the sheer energy bled through.

Quickly scanning the horizon, Chuck identified the largest, most rocky, and unfriendly mountain he could and pumped every watt of energy he could into the engines. _Freelancer_ began to rattle as she far exceeded the in-atmosphere speed rating. Alarms sounded as his velocity fell even more.

"Hold on!" He screamed.

The Reaper was the first to hit the mountain, instantly being torn in half, fire rapidly consuming it. The two halves were sent hurtling off, slamming into the side of _Freelancer_ and sending her into a downward spiral before they slammed into neighboring mountains. They detonated like heated rocks, sending a shower of debris for kilometers around and gutting the mountains.

"Jump!" Chuck screamed, sending the neural command through his access node and slamming the activation button.

Freelancer vanished in a flash of light, the resulting slipstream wake expanding like a dying star, encompassing and incinerating everything in its path. Atmosphere boiled and popped and rippled. Anything of that Reaper that survived was now free-floating atoms, never to be reassembled.

Chuck opened his eyes, blinking to find himself staring at something blue. His eyes widened and he pulled up on the throttle, fighting physics and the laws of nature themselves as he sent the million-ton

craft upwards. They had missed a watery grave by a few meters, at most.

"Fucking hell, Sonnenburg. Good work," Jennifer called out from the back.

"Thank you, ma'am," he responded, smirking.

"Ma'am! Commander 117 is requesting immediate assistance, he and his teams are pinned down approximately a hundred and fifty kilometers from here," GROUNDOPS called out.

"Chuck, get us there!" Jennifer barked out, "Weapons, ready all operational ground batteries for immediate suppressive fire!"

****SSV **_**Windfall**_**

****Unknown Star System****

Windfall snapped into existence, a purple sheath of particles slowly slipping off her form as she removed herself from her faster-than-light flight. Her hull bore the marks of battle, angry black smears dominated her wings and baffles and jagged orange marks were the telltale signs of collision with Reaper fire.

"Report!" Captain Peter Janz called out.

"FTL jump was a success," Lieutenant Davidson responded, "We're away from Sol. Locationâ€¦unknown." His brow tightened, "Triangulating. Estimate we are 50,000 light-years out from Earth."

"How the hell did we do ten thousand years worth of travel in an hour, exactly?" Captain Janz asked. Even with the experimental slipstream drive, they couldn't have been that fast. Not even the _Infinity_ was believed to be able to travel that quickly.

"We jumped just as a large group of Reapers entered the system, that might be why," responded Davidson. The Systems Alliance barely knew anything about Slipstream space besides that it was a separate dimension. The recovered drive from _Infinity_'s fighter didn't come with an encyclopedia.

Peter bit his bottom lip, "Scan the surrounding systems for a Mass Relay. In the mean time, let's set up shop along that asteroid belt."

"Confirmed," responded Davidson. He plotted the course and felt _Windfall_ kick into action, sending the four-hundred meter cruiser gliding through space like a shark.

The system they were in was desolate, a few rocky worlds of ash and fire set against a blinking red giant. Space here, instead of the ice black of the outer arms, was a pale, rusty red with splotches of gold and black.

No life could exist this close to the center of the galaxy; Sagittarius-A ensured that. The amount of supernovae, dying stars and radiation ensured that all but the tiniest of microbes died a painful and quick death. The Alliance and the Council had avoided this area like the plague, navigation systems, even dual-navs like _Windfall_

became erratic. Enzo cores started to malfunction as well, hulls groaned and cracked and radiation permeated the hull.

The Asari had sent out probes and ships early on in the Council's history to the center of the galaxy. The rumors were that they had found something and crawled back, dying and irradiated from what they saw.

He was hoping those were just rumorsâ€”tales from an age of darkness and fear.

"Contact, approximately 10,000 kilometers out from the Red Giant."

Davidson's eyes widened.

"Show me, full magnification," the Captain called out.

The main display snapped on, hundreds of tiny cameras feeding an image through the ship. The contact was a long, shimmering band that flowered at both ends like a hydra. These tendrils came and wrapped around, shimmering colors of gold, silver, purple, and black across the body. A stream of matter reached from the star into either ends of the massive construct.

"Arm weapons. Davidson, full stop. Sensors, make sure we are recording every bit of this we can."

Davidson's head started to hurt. That construct was calling to him, summoning him to kneel before it. He felt a trickle of blood fall out of his nose. He looked around, his crew mates were exhibiting the same symptoms, some bled from the ears as well.

"Display, off!" Peter barked, "Davidson, keep us ten AU out from that thing. Weapons, keep a lock on that thing and sensors, if that thing even twitches, I want to know about it."

"Understood, sir."

"Whatever that thing is, it's old," Captain Janz said. "and hungry."

To Be Continuedâ€|.

Chapter 17: Scorpio coming early spring

End
file.